ART RECESS 2

POETRY AND MORE

Desmond Swords on *Apparition Poems*: UK List-Serve (2011)

Built into the structure of the Internet is a certain amount of depth and density. Google searches do not bring up everything; some sites are "embedded" more than others, and it varies from country to country, continent to continent. Excavation can become a wonted task, and old texts that were not widely noted upon release can be recuperated. Excavation and recuperation are not just Internet processes; they are artistic processes as well. One goal I set to/for myself with the Blazevox book *Apparition Poems* (2010), was to excavate and recuperate certain aspects of the Romantic ethos. More specifically, the ethos that was set in place by William Wordsworth in his Preface (to *Lyrical Ballads*). That the task of the self-respecting Author was to enlarge the mind-capacity of his/her audience; that the dignity of the human mind is inherent and indestructible; that the human mind may be subtly, rather than grossly, stimulated; and that common situations can embody portentous meanings when recuperated with and by imagination; this corpus of notions hinged on other interests that were certainly not Wordsworth's (what about carnality and carnal engagements?) Indeed, *Apparition Poems* is streaked by perversity and an air of the macabre, against Romantic commonplaces. Nevertheless, almost precisely eighteen months after the release of the Blazevox book, I was able to excavate the following List-Serve directed (and quite jocular!) missive from a UK website, scribed by one Desmond Swords:

Bob Sheppard's Star Student Scott Desmond's Words Flyte Fielded,

Yes, yes, one read the pose by this 'poet, critic, and musician' colleague, currently where erm, you were a year ago, nearing the end of that long hard road to attainment as a pro in doctoral po-biz, Jeff - collegiately alleging a claim that nearly everything to follow Four Quartets has been 'dross'.

One chuckled at the ambition, audacity and foolishness of deploying such a term in the forum of Letters; before turning one's focus to adducing the verse and other critical prose assays by the author Adam attempting to pull off such a theatrically audacious play as this.

"She told me I love boy/girl poems, love scenes in them based on a deep degeneracy
inherited from too much heat around my
genitals, as manifest in tangents I could only

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see if I was getting laid. She told me this as
I was getting laid in such a way that any notion
of telling was subsumed in an ass as stately as
a mansion, which I filled with the liquid
cobwebs of my imagination."

Yeats would be proud of the cant and ergo argoist, very very classy Adam Fieled's verse. Proper spillage. High Art indeed from our playboy crown-prince doing what one does.

Effecting agreement among this reader, on X and Y being the only two one is on collegiate amity and perfect accord with Adam about, as a bosom buddy chum and prophetical practitoner with the imbas to know why, when, what and how, for example, Eliot can successfully operate as a symbol for agreement between Fieled and oneself.

High and Low Art in the 'making' of verse activity, you know, as a 'poetry'— there's often very little agreement about, and in America, poetry atomized into 10,000 different individual, unique and original practices, all curated by a genius with big ideas about what kind of reality Poetry is, adam, the only critical debate in AmPo parish at present, as you know, has one essential point of agreement most practitioners of contemporary American poetry found as your datum: MFA.
After this, a forking occurs and we diverge into our own pool of plod and production sailor, not believing any of it matters. That our thinking is nought but a performance in print, anything other than that: Not real. Thought, Fielding.

Have a think about it. I'll get back to you.

What is interesting (and gratifying) to me about this piece is the context it arose from. I had just published a piece in the UK online journal The Argotist Online entitled *Century XX after Four Quartets*. The gist of the piece was that poetry in the English language decayed horribly in the second half of the twentieth century. Other critical forays from this period, like *On the Necessity of Bad Reviews* and *The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry* got a bigger instant public reaction than this one did. A response that defended me with my *Apparition Poems*, and their excavated/recuperated Romantic ethos, was written and placed in a manner that straddled public and private spheres. Did Mr. Swords know he was being archived? The letter mixes jocularity (even, at points, to the edge of absurdity) with serious overtones. What could have been a post-modern performance from Mr. Swords was nudged in the direction of the Romantic by earnest edges. The dynamic between Century XX..., the Apparition Poems, and Mr. Swords piece are interesting; on one level, radical and provocative conservatism is getting "filled in" by the ironic humor which is post-modernity's *metier*. The Apparition Poems form a middle ground here, as a site— not bereft of absurdities or earnestness, ironies or direct statements. The meta-nature of the poem quoted is heightened by an intellectually challenging and substantial narrative. Mr. Swords chose to defend me with a poem that would be offensive to a "pure" Romantic ethos. It includes sexual slang, and pornographic overtones. But that I was excavating and recuperating something Romantic (and many consider Yeats a latter-day Romantic) is hinted at. The structure of the Internet has created many circles like this in literature. Excavation and

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recuperation are processes that force the issue of repetition at close range. What is, and matters most, must be repeated: terrible, beautiful.

***Equations*: Thesis: *#45* (added July 2023)**

Growing up with Emma, who had been in my class at CHS, wasn't like growing up with Roberta. It wasn't like anything. Emma, a lanky blonde with long, lank blonde hair, a chiseled, cat-like face, and long limbs, looked like a stunt double for Trish, and had been merely an acquaintance. She was quiet, and kept to herself. Her friends were among the geeks of the class. Why and how Emma knew to show up now, in the midst of all this turbulence with Trish, I have no idea, but she did. I laughed because she so resembled Trish, but I was also aroused. I liked the idea, past N and Roberta, of a real hook-up within my class, even ten years after the fact. She was there, at the Last Drop, on a succession of key summer days, in a sleeveless white blouse. After all these years, her cat-face grew on me as enchanting, compelling, suggestive of something her whole presence insinuated— she identified heavily with Trish, and had a female impulse to demarcate turf which could also be hers. Whether she'd been stalking us or just heard what was happening with us from the suburbs, I still don't know. I knew she was commuting to Center City from somewhere. What she wanted was just one night with me, I later concluded. When, on the one late afternoon I made my way with her back to Logan Square, we were ensconced, she took out a bottle of Robitussin as though it were an aperitif, and she were Trixie Belle. She wanted, as she said, a Robo-trip. It was part of the magic of that night that Emma wound up encapsulating for me so many different partners at once, including partners merely being anticipated. I found it easy to begin making love to her, because she made it easy. Her equation was interesting, about female levels of awareness— everything about her physiology screamed, you always wanted me the most, but you just didn't know it. You're a man— you don't know these things. I have delivered myself to you because you need me now, and I need you. Now you may begin to learn who you are. And we made love with great fluidity and rapidity, and then we made love again. Her fluidity was like Heather's would be, and the sense of being lulled into a trance of perpetual, high-intensity intercourse, on the bed, then on the living room floor, on the couch in the living room, from the front, from the back, was like Jena. We each gave the other a show-stopping performance, manifesting (as was odd, and as I was not too dumb and callow to notice) an inversion of our years of starving for each other. The absolute ecstasy of several mutual orgasms was the tactile insignia, as it might've been with Roberta and N, of an eternity of denial overcome. This, even as what was built into us both had been noticed only by her. Why, in sex equations, women usually hold the cards: women are receptive to sensory data on a deeper level than men, and have a primordial understanding of physiology, of bodies and more bodies, which men do not. When bodies speak, women listen more. Emma and I shared a home, but only she registered what our bodies shared, what was in them. When Trish showed up, it was a red flag from nature that it would be Emma's time to show up too. Even if it proved to be the cosmic design that after one night, I would never see Emma again.

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From *Galatea Resurrects*, 2008

Beams by Adam Fieled is an e-book from Blazevox. It is a multifaceted work that is both formally and typographically inventive, as well as being linguistically intriguing. To do full justice to the poetry in this volume would require a much longer and detailed review of essay length; such is the complexity and multifaceted nature of this work. So, all I will attempt in this review is to isolate certain features that can be readily recognized. Beams comprises four titled sections: 'Beams', 'Apparition Poems', 'Madame Psychoses', and 'Virtual Pinball' (this latter being composed with poet Lars Palm). Each of these sections contain poems stylistically different to those of the other sections. An important aspect to the 'Beams' section is Fieled's poetic aesthetic regarding it. The poems in it represent his concept of the poetic "beam". The following is an extract from his exposition of this poetic, which can be read at http://artrecess2.blogspot.com/2005/08/beam-hypothesis.html:

[A beam is] a short poem, 8-20 lines [not] necessarily impersonal or personal, but it must transcend mere subjectivity […] single lines interspersed function as "beams of light". They're pure shots into poetic space, flashes of imagery, insight, gist-phrasing, etc. Light-beams illuminate built-beams [ie architectural structures], built-beams support and buttress light-beams. Together, they posit the BEAM as a kind of "light-house" or "light-structure."

The manifestation of this poetic aesthetic in the 'Beams' section applies to all of its poems, but other aspects tangentially related also pertain, particularly where colour (light) and matter (objects) are made to amalgamate in such a way as to produce an almost iridescent affect which draws attention to the "variability" that underlies phenomena (according to quantum theory). The aesthetic result is that material objects are seen to display less than palpable qualities: light becomes semi-palpable in 'Creep' (p.7) were it is described as 'Sponge-light', and in 'Leaves' (p.12) matter becomes semi-iridescent:

Leaves tonight are leaning spots of light […]

The use of such affects serves to give us a sense of the underlying subatomic volatility that forms the objects of the observed world. It has a sort of Blakean sense whereby the visible world is seen to envelop a subtler one. The world is not all it seems to be. In doing this with words, Fieled makes almost tangible to our senses what can but remain only rational inference if we are reliant on same from a study of quantum physics. No small achievement for a poet. However, the poems are not limited to such affects. They also manage to concisely represent the vicissitudes of human experience in all their variations. In 'Razor' (p.8) we find lines such as,

edged like needle-scars along arm-veins
everything I can't puncture is there

which in association with the lines,

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bottoms grow hardened from rubs
& sharpness be a baby's candy

not only produce an interesting juxtaposition, but also represent birth and death. They suggest the bitterness, regret, and frustration that is the lot of humanity, yet they also suggest hope in that we become hardened in order for that suffering to become almost as acceptable to us as candy is to a baby.

Throughout this collection, a recurring motif relating to sexual struggle is evident. In 'Sex Hex' (p.9) we have a deft account of man's unremitting desire for sexual fulfilment described in almost "biological determinist" terms, yet alluding to the nuances inherent in any discussion of male dominance within a given society, as is suggested by the mention of Foucault:

take her up, stroke her belly, she'll think of Foucault

The biological controlling impulses of the male driven to physical action is counter-balanced by the cerebral passivity of the female who, by thinking of Foucault, both gives in to the male's seduction ploy but also demonstrates an intellectuality that is not evident in the male at this particular time in their relationship. The problematical relationship between the sexes is further evinced in terms of consciousness in the 'Madame Psychoses' section. In 'Sarah Israel' (p.33) we see how memory almost reinvents or remodels the past regarding a yearned for "other":

I saw her in a seeing not seen by any eye,
& the "I" that saw, saw my eye not at all.

Here, identity and perception become entwined as the punning of 'eye' with 'I' demonstrates. This punning acts as a poetic device to illustrate the very real inextricable union that identity and perception must necessarily have. It is a union so binding that the two become mutually exclusive causing the poet confusion as he struggles to wade his way through something of solipsist maze. In 'Paula' (p.37) we see the ultimate expression of male sexual and emotional yearning that represents the lot of Everyman:

chaos, order, clipped bird-like into
wings & cries. I could only ever
think; paula. all the thrusts &
pumps that could never be. "all"
that must be withheld, & that
it might be better that way.

you gave me the gift; savouring

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wanting. how it really was you
I wanted. not a body but a soul.

I tell myself I've "been through
you", forever & never. zero here,
same as two. empty.saturated. dark

I have quoted the entire poem. Such is its universality pertaining to male desire any commentary by me would be more than superfluous. Indeed, it would not be outlandish to suggest that in this poem Fieled has articulated more than John Donne allowed himself to in those poems of Donne's that evince similar concerns.

Jeffrey Side

From *moria poetry*, 2008

I was very fortunate to pick up a copy of *Opera Bufa* when I did. I went to see Andrew Lundwall and Daniela Olszewska read at Myopic books and was browsing the authors-who-have-been-here shelf before it started. I went upstairs and sat down. Andrew was late; he lives an hour or so outside of town. I started reading.

I don't know too much about opera, but I think that it would be a lovely experience in the spring, as is Adam's book, as is going to a good poetry reading, which is what I meant that I was fortunate to pick up a copy, right now, especially, when the spring is creeping in and melting up a bit of winter's hard and coldness. The book had some kind of similar effect on me, like music, as it is music, as it really is, and as it also uses as its larger metaphor.

The themes start and they start to mix. The way that they mix is the first part of the opera, a part which is sustained for a very large portion of the poem; so long, in fact, that I thought that was what the whole poem would be like. But it did change, and I very much appreciated that. I imagine that operas change partway through. I know our lives do. Adam writes, "as if you were a cup of finished ice-cream, I'd be a brown-eyed moon goddess"(11). Is this a good time to mention that I told Andrew after the reading that my favorite line of his was, "I want to eat some ice cream. I want to fuck my face with vanilla. Seems like it." Adam mentions right off that the rhythms are pitiless because we do not know how they began and this is a good example: "Rhythms become streams of possible shoe-lace, slugs of 3 a.m. Scotch, lust after thy neighbor's daughter, mooning on the lawn"(7) and later "You become gum"(36).

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Adam latches onto rhythms that are already at play in the world and sifts into them his mix of observation, word play, conjecture, description, subversion and other games of linguistic and logic, testing out our frames of reference. Many sentences land themselves in a music of metaphor that made me keep wanting more. In this weird time of wanting to start a book that I see wing past my window on Goodreads or having guilt about setting one aside that I've already committed to publicly, it was just an absolute joy to want to keep reading and reading until I was finished. And, though I hate to admit this for fear that it reveals something about my attention span, this is rare. Also related to spring, I felt very fortunate to be reading about so many actions that are happening outside from section to section, so much grass and color and even running along the Schuylkill, which makes me miss Philly in the springtime, too. In terms of the balance that Adam's creating in the book from section to section, he's bringing in a real record of the outside world to pour into his metaphors. This is not only a great springtime thing to think about, but also an important poetic for getting the poet outside of themselves. It was riveting to watch Adam's real-time reactions as he wrote the world into the opera, which must ultimately be sung with a voice.

Well what do I want to say about the end of the opera. The opera begins to end and then it begins to know it is ending and then it is ending and then it ends. At one point, at the very beginning of the ending as I saw it, Adam writes, "I only knew two scales, and I played them every which way"(44) and then he writes, "I saw a thousand hues, and each was differently used" (49) and how can they both be true? Well they are in this opera. In the first statement, he admits that his initial range might seem limited, but in the next he shows that what he observes in the world is much more multiple. Although a bounded being, external experience is what, looking back to the first statement, allows him to create real complexity with his writing. A writer has only so many words but each encounter is new and provides new materials, new ideas, and new combinations of thoughts and words. There's an attention that Adam is drawing to this paradox of language that poetry permeates as he draws his opera to a close. Perhaps one of the things about opera is that it transmits a vital energy; besides its mimetic purpose as theater, large swells of sound are projected with so much skill into the confined space of the hall. Within *Opera Bufa*, there is real life stirring inside the language as it finds a climax out of the constraints of its own conjuring.

I finished *Opera Bufa* while I was getting my hair cut, another spring thing, getting rid of the heavy mess of growth on my head that had gotten out of control over the winter. Now I feel lighter. I guess that when it's time to finish a book of really fine poetry, "it is the hour of feeling, when singing must cease" (59). Adam writes, "If only I felt that life, concentrated into song, could be fruit juice for thirsty joggers. Alas, it is not so" (62). Well, maybe I'm in an especially optimistic mood right now, but I disagree.

Laura Goldstein, 2008

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Opera Bufa: "Divertimento Giocoso" or Coping with Absence?

Time, as a linear construction, tends to herd people into viewing their lives I in terms of memory, present sensual stimulation, and hypothetical premonitions. The English language reflects this structure by allowing us to speak in various verbal tenses, and narratives that employ multiple temporal settings can transport the reader or auditor into emotional states contingent upon a temporal location designated by the author. We construct our perceptions of the world based not only on language, however but also on images that elicit emotional responses and generate new thoughts or ideas. Memory works in a similar way, by cataloguing images corresponding to one's emotional and physical state in the past, like a physical stamp on one's brain that tries, then, to translate it into words. Memory, which can take such a strong hold on one's perception, depends upon loss for its own creation, such that one must lose something in order to look back on in it memory. Poets have long been tackling the problem of forgetting and memory, coping with grief, mourning lost lovers or friends, and feeling out the concept of nostalgia through their work. In *Opera Bufa*, Adam Fieled builds an entire opera out of prose poems, weaving through it themes of sex, music, literature, and drugs, all of which become threads that attempt to explore this concept. His emotional release onto the page is a highly poetic form reduced to potent and poignant prose that describes losing as a means of artistic creation.

Throughout Fieled's opera, he remembers past lovers and the loss of physical objects, but he continually highlights the arbitrariness of the "what" that is gone, profiting from a focus on the expression engendered by absence. Afterall, the first line of his poetic musical score reads, "Losing is the lugubriousness of Chopin." (5) By equating "losing" with an interpretation of Chopin's style he transforms the concept of absence into the great work of an infamous composer in six words. Fieled underscores the importance of what comes from the emotional reaction caused by deprivation rather than the object or feeling originally lost: "It is simply bereavement that leads us here, to these images." (16) Loss engenders these "images" that eventually lead to new thought, creating inventive juxtapositions and fresh concepts. He goes even further by drawing attention to his own creative process and his reconfiguration of mourning when he says,

What has been lost thus far? It's just tar on a highway, bound for ocean. Or, it's the migratory flight of a carrier pigeon. It is all things that move and breathe, coalesced into sound…It is octaves, repeated in a funhouse mirror until a decibel level is reached that a dog alone may hear. I am the dog that hears, the dog that conducts, the dog that puts bones on the table. (50)

In this citation, the poet refers to himself as the *ramasseur* of the fragmented pieces created by loss. He "conducts" the broken pieces into poetry to be put onto the table for the public to digest.

Furthermore, Fieled directly mentions memory, saying that it is "as sweet as reality" (59) and then relates the two of these to dreams. This statement disregards any difference between the past and the present in terms of experience and one's emotional state. His comparison to dreams, then, links them all together through their capacity to provoke strong emotional experiences and vivid imagery. However, he separates the dream world from the others by saying, "I have learned to what extent

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dreams are real. They may not be solid as a cast-iron pot, but they are enough." (59) But *enough* for what exactly? Here Fieled suggests that dreams suffice as inspiration for artistic expression. A few, short lines after, he sums up this theory of creation in stating, "It is the hour of feeling, when singing must cease." (59) Here, "the hour of feeling" refers to the present, profiting from the woman he finds himself next to in order to experience the moment as the present. However, as he states himself, these privileged instances of living in the present moment exclude the possibility of creative release; during these moments, "singing must cease." In one of his other poems in which he references the power of imagination, he says, "I know that I had to dream an opera to really sing. I know I had to dream singing to really write." (54) The poet's creativity cultivated in this dream world derives directly from the concept of losing control. Once his subconscious eliminates all barriers constructed by reason or rationality, Fieled really starts to sing.

Opera Bufa bulges at the seams with drug references to describe an elimination of control. Cocaine and mescaline dispossess users of their governance over their own visual faculties, causing hallucinations and amplifying all external stimuli. This state of being induced by drugs parallels the dream state that Fieled exploits for tapping into new creativity. Drugs, however, grant extended access to this alternative existence in which one's subconscious yields to consciousness, whereas the dreamer forgoes all control involuntarily. Fieled references the prevalent drug culture of the psychedelic rock scene in San Francisco during the 1960's and 70's to infuse his poetry with this theme: "stay where shadows press themselves in upon you. Stay with the purple riders and their sage buttons." (16) This is the first drug allusion of *Opera Bufa*, and boldly opens the doors for others to follow. His mention of "purple riders" adorned with "sage buttons" points directly to the band New Riders of the Purple Sage, a country rock band that emerged from this drug and music culture of California in 1969. The term "purple riders" describes users of a mildly hallucinogenic aromatic herb found in Southern California commonly used in Native American ceremonies. Though Fieled makes this insinuation early on in his work, he picks up the thread again towards the end when Maria Callas says to him, "We are all purple riders" as she slowly exhales a ribbon of smoke. Though the author also mentions the use of cocaine, this theme of hallucinogenic drugs is more tightly weaved into his story as he openly associates it with Maria Callas, one of the narrator's inspirations, his former lover, and the woman who performs his *Opera Bufa*.

In addition, the poet dissolves boundaries signifying binary opposition to destroy conventional associations and meaning. Many images created by Fieled seem cryptic, and the reader must often wrestle the sentence into some sort of submission from which he or she can draw any digestible meaning. For example, he says things such as, "The history of popcorn is a minor third that can be squelched by intense bed-thuds," (31) or "keep your pug-face for the aesthete tax collecting slobber-heads." (28) He also tests one's logic by using such hypothetical reasoning as, "If you were a cup of finished ice cream, I'd be a brown-eyed moon-goddess." (11) These lines disorient the reader and also reflect on Fieled's own state of mind during the creation process. In describing his own style, Fieled says, "As for fluorescence, those crayons were always my favorites anyway. If the color is off, it's because my set collapsed, if not into nullity, then into plurality." (54) He tears down the blatant

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contrasts separating nullity from plurality and life from death to create a space in between, seemingly void of sense and control, from which poetry and song spring forth in abundance. He says that “song cannot be spared when life and death adhere,” (56) and it is within this grey space that Fieled writes. Inside this space, in which everything seems arbitrary and undeterminable, people create new connections between words and images, create new meaning, and better understand themselves.

In losing control and sacrificing reason, Fieled actually *gains* control over his own creative style and the structure of his work. The opening sentence in which he mentions Chopin establishes the poet’s theme and perspective that he will tease out during the fifty-nine poems to follow. He relies heavily on the concept of absence and its multiple contributions to the creative process in the first quarter of his opera before he enters into other themes. In his first poem, Fieled says,

What’s lost might be a sea shell or a tea cup or the bloody scalp of an Indian; it hardly matters. When you are lost, the heart recedes from exterior currents, too much in sync with itself, its groove vicissitudes. Each encounter, rather than revealing new rhythms, is experienced as a clangorous din, a pounding…to push the heart deeper and deeper into pitiless darkness…We squirm within ourselves to the sound of the Devil’s opera bufa. (5)

He disregards what sends him into this “pitiless darkness” to focus on the experience he lives once there. Fieled plants the seed of an idea that should slowly blossom in the reader’s mind through their experience with his work and returns to the original concept in his final poems. Eight poems from the end, he begins an “inventory” of what is lost, of what remains, and of what has been gained. A few poems before that, he says, “What has been lost thus far? It’s just tar on a highway, bound for ocean,” (50) lines that provide deeper reflection upon an idea that was similarly stated in the first lines of his work. In using this structure, Fieled has created a strong thematic foundation that circles back on itself, and he fills the middle with layers of relevant ideas, juxtaposed colors and images, and a stylized imagery presented in a simple, yet very rich and highly poetic style.

Stacy Blair, Loyola University Chicago, 2008

Sex and Shadows: Mary Walker Graham, Stacy Blair, Becky Hilliker (2009-2025)

The poems I would like to explore today belong to Boston's **Mary Walker Graham**. Many of Graham's poems adopt the tonal posture that the protagonist is either a violated victim, or caught in the throes of self-castigation; veer towards the straight Confessional, but always with an added dimension and depth (imaginative capacity) which places her (to my eyes) squarely within the confines of post-avant. The following is a prose poem, entitled *A Pit, A Broken Jaw, A Fever*:

When I say pit, I'm thinking of a peach's. As in James and the Giant, as in: the night has many things for a girl to imagine. The way the flesh of the peach can never be extricated, but clings— the fingers follow the juice. The tongue proceeds along the groove. Dark peach: become a night cavern

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— an ocean's inside us— a balloon for traveling over. When I said galleons of strong arms without heads, I meant natives, ancient. I meant it takes me a long time to get past the hands of men; I can barely get to their elbows. How a twin bed can become an anchor. How a balloon floating up the stairwell can become a person. Across the sea of the hallway then, I floated. I hung to the fluorescent fixtures in the bathroom, I saw a decapitated head on the toilet. I'll do anything to keep from going in there. I only find the magazines under the mattress, the Vaseline in the headboard cabinet. A thought so hot you can't touch it. A pit. A broken jaw. A fever.

This poem oozes creepiness. Among the aspects I find most notable: the way that Graham's protagonist self-infantilizes (regarding herself not as a woman but as a "girl"), the imagery that conflates the sexual with the horrific (Vaseline butting against a decapitated head, broken jaws, fevers), and the intimation that what is at the heart of this confrontation is some sort of compulsive relationship. Yet the poem is intriguing because, despite its intimations, it never abandons the first person singular. Whomever the "you" happens to be, we never see them, they are never addressed, and the poem posits no "Other." There is solipsism at work, which cuts the implied "you" down to size; the narrator may be involved in an unhealthy relationship, but the primary feeling we get is one of self-loathing and self-disgust, expressed with compelling (and disturbing) intensity. The generalized phrases, addressed to men, serve to illustrate, as is Graham's wont, the narrator's alienation from whatever specific man is sewn into the situation, interior and exterior.

Everything about the subject's relationship, both to coitus and to responses to coitus, is posited along axis structures of attraction and repulsion, a push-pull edge that narrativizes how the subject experiences passion. That the affect emanation is dark and dour also creates an axis of attraction and repulsion for the reader, who may choose to engage or disengage, based on temperament, and the principle of fascination being stimulated or not. Form vacillates between poetry and prose, strictures and freedom, uneasily.

There is also an unlikely quality to Graham's metaphors: what exactly could "balloon" imply, in this context? How can it be connected to the "peach" that Graham puts it up against? At one point, Graham creates a metaphoric chain, all meant to represent the same thing: *dark peach, night cavern, ocean, balloon*. The most obvious interpretation is that the metaphor is meant to signify the female sexual organ. However, the metaphoric chain is distorted, phantasmagoric, and macabre. A stretch is required to allow the metaphoric chain to work, just as Graham stretches to convey what she wants to convey, which is equally brutal and surreal, and supports a consistent persona. The following poem, *Double*, first appeared in ***Ocho #11***, and works an analogous angle:

Here is a box of fish marked tragedy.
Is it different from the dream

in which your alter ego kills the girl?
You are the same, and everyone knows it,

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whether tracing the delicate lip of the oyster shell,
or sharpening your blade in the train car.

The marvelous glint is the same.
Though you think you sleep, you wake

and walk into the hospital, fingering
each instrument, opening each case with care.

The scales fall away with a scraping motion.
You are the surgeon and you are the girl.

Whether you lie like feathers on the pavement,
or coolly pocket your equipment, and walk away...

You are the same; and you are the same.
You only sleep to enter the luminous cave.

I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that this poem places itself in an introspective realm of infantile sexuality. Yet that it is written from an adult perspective gives it a kind of double edge. If there is terror here, it is terror of the protagonist's own sexual power. The interest and pleasure for the reader is in trying to understand the different levels of self-evaluation that are going on, and how they affix to the narrator's sense of herself— how her persona is constructed. As in *A Pit*, there is a level of sexual solipsism inhering in the protagonist which becomes a maze, in and of itself. There is also a level on which the poem exteriorizes its own discomfort through the use of "gross" imagery: box(es) of fish, blades, surgeons. What is the nature of the operation? What necessitates it?

Reversing *A Pit*, the poem is given added depth because it is presented in the second person: not "I" but "you." It takes on the quality of a narrator talking to herself about herself, and makes the poem an exercise in imaginative self-consciousness, more so than *A Pit*. I find this admirable because it recuperates the tone of Confessional poetry, but puts it through a new kind of synesthetic light filter. What Graham sees as "Double" could be a split between her body and her mind, or between her sexuality and her intellect, or even between herself and another. Whatever it is, it has left her in pieces, and the poem seems to be an attempt to reassemble herself. Both of these poems, and other Graham work, present a consistent persona, a tangent to **Stacy Blair's**: a polymorphously perverse girl-woman lost in the never-land of her own body (and polymorphously perverse can imply a body of thoughts and ideas in addition to the mere physical mechanism.) Though possibly mainstream-consonant, as has been duly noted, through usage of conventional narrative techniques, and exploration of familiar emotions, it would be difficult to get more edgy, in the parlance of this discourse around post-avant, than that. Like painter **Jenny Kanzler**, Graham torques the Creatrix

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archetype in on itself, so that narratives of passion become narratives of purgation, yogic exercises to make metaphors. For a post-avant (or Neo-Romantic) analogue, see fellow Bostonian **Becky Hilliker**.

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The second portion of the Sex and Terror post is being scribed at a later date: January 2017. With the addition of new material to P.F.S. Post from **Stacy Blair**, a Midwestern poetess, there is more to see and say about the pertinent issues hewn into these texts— the creation of a new kind of female persona in American poetry; a new approach to female sexuality and the female body; and a continuing, obsessive interest in the dark or shaded portion of both sexual and human reality. As of January 21, the poem by Stacy Blair which crowns PFS Post is called *Photo Experiments*:

Blonde locks jut out over the tops of pigtails,
bleached beach/sand-color by the sun.
Time's short between this photograph and my regard.
Picture: no flower lays or shoes, just
young grass hips. She is, I am, we were,
very young. The entire page of this album
flanks history; under my mind, another
helpless time explosion. I was, we were, are,
naked newborn, as our little limbs on film.

What might strike the reader as most urgent thematically— the artful insinuation of pregnancy— is buttressed by the same strain of self-castigation, self-reproach, and self-mistrust we find in Graham. Like Graham, "young grass hips," "flanks," and "flower lays" are all heavy innuendo about carnality. What makes the poem so fascinating are the divisions and precisions Blair incises into her perceptions of identity— who she was, who she is now as two distinct selves; who she is and who her assumed lover is, also as two distinct selves; and the third entity they create together (possibly the unborn child) being distinct from them as another gestalt entity. It is difficult not to read "helpless time explosion" specifically as a reference to pregnancy— and equally gripping, because addressed, text-wise, with taut, terse authority. The phrase narrativizes, also, the attraction/repulsion dynamic at the heart of issues being explored, and/or processed through purgation. The body's helplessness redeems itself in the yogic tension-release incised into fulfilled textuality. Caesuras here create a sense of hypnosis for the reader, brief incantation become a formal edge. The poem ends in irresolution, purposefully– and the chiaroscuro edge (or edges) of what I called post-avant many years ago is very much in effect, on display. Why the Aughts created this sense of dread, of foreboding, along with the shadowy seductiveness of stark eroticism, is anyone's guess; a reaction to the stunted quality of the female body (and the female brain in response) in century XX art?

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For **Becky Hilliker**, narrativization opens a vista slightly more expansive than for Graham and Blair. Her insignia poem *Catch* takes the tropes of both the broadly sexual and the construction-of-persona from the sexual and makes significations resonate towards something more primordial, about essence and disappearance:

The wind turns the water into an animal
& the boat rides the back of swells,
bucking wetly.
My legs absorb the push & pull,
thinking only of the fish,
sleek & dripping on the line,
neon green parachute ballooning
from its mouth.

I arch my back
& the rod dives.
The fish lifts, slimy as an egg,
spinning like a ballerina
on a silver thread,
its marble eye mute,
fixed on white.

How many times
did you find this world,
blinded, terrified?
There are hands on you
& pliers in your mouth,
metallic, blood-washed.
How many times have you waited
for the water
while everything lurches around you,
brilliant white, like the inside
of a hospital, like the underbelly
of a dream, gasping
to break the surface
toward that cold & sudden light?

Like Mary Walker Graham, the yogic affecting of catharsis through sexualization of metaphor and imagery is prominent. Phrases like “bucking wetly,” “I arch my back,” “the rod dives,” all generate the impression that Graham is present as a companion and influence (both poetesses are affiliated

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with Boston). However, the final stanza finds Hilliker taking Creatrix energy to a sense of metaphoric identification, past the strictly sexual. Hilliker transubstantiates into a sense of becoming her own "Catch," and both the chain of similes and resolution that develop from this textually enact themselves in a fevered narrativization of original passion, passion being born. Death/birth, as a dynamic, is assayed as the poetess's seminal passion manifests from a vision of her own death-throes. The phenomenological non-constraint of no-boundaries register's Hilliker's consciousness a possessed one, as inside/outside tactile realities merge seamlessly in language hurled from the inside of one movement, one thrust, one ejaculation.

Indeed, the sense of textual crescendo built into *Catch* is admirable. It takes significations which for the reader could remain static and whirls them around into a dynamic context. Moreover, because the crescendo is built from the portion of the piece, past sexuality, into the idea of the original, the generative, and the ultimate similarity of birth and death (as yogic exercises involve generation and release of tensions from wellsprings of birth/death energies in the body), Hilliker employs sexualized imagery to dig deeper, into the phenomenology of origins, than Graham does. Hilliker is her own prey — which is to say, she registers herself, as a construct, originating from a double, a second form, of what could be taken as something homely she sees before her. That narrative of form built into *Catch* is about a textual reality more clipped, terse, staccato than Graham and Blair. The sense that the poem harnesses its resources towards a blinding sense of linguistic release at its conclusion, in a parallel structure with two similes ("like the inside/ of a hospital," "like the underbelly/of a dream"), makes it a more tense, herky-jerky, less steady ride than most of Mary Walker Graham's material. A matter of aesthetic preference, whether the measured quality of Graham's prosody or Hilliker's leaps and jolts generate pleasure, fascination.

On a general note: there is nothing new, necessarily, about narratives of form and passion. If the congeries of elements which make up that signification now deserve emphasis, around the idea of the Creatrix, it is because the Aughts saw the development, in the United States, of a number of female artists for whom form and passion were absolutely relevant. This, rather than a conceptual or theoretical bias, drawn from political or feminist ideologies, or assaying of cultural critiques. Neo-Romanticism, as I define it, and as is seen in Graham, Blair, and Hilliker, takes its roots in the consciousness of the individual. The development of individual and individualized concerns, perceptions, even neuroses, then constitutes the progress towards the enlightenment of engaged artistic expression. If this is all true, what the States has seen from post-modernity, multi-culturalism, and academic feminism, become inadequate to address the concerns of poets like Graham, Blair, and Hilliker. A new set of terms, and theoretical framework, is needed. Thus, P.F.S. Post.

***Equations*, and Mary Evelyn Harju**

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Now that the work of prose fiction entitled *Equations* is available in its entirety on PennSound, in two parts: *The Thesis Episodes* and *The Jade Episodes*: some elucidation might be helpful, if the book is to be widely heard and read. One obvious question worth answering: is the book literal, or meant to be taken literally, i.e. was it written out of genuine, authentic relationship experiences? Yes, most of it was. The dialectic structure of the book, and other things about it, necessitates its designation as prose fiction; yet many of the characters who enliven the book were real people in my life. The most literal character in the book, by a considerable margin, is Trish Webber. Those who know me, know that Trish Webber is closely modeled on painter Mary Evelyn Harju, who could also be called simply Mary Harju or Mary H. in the Aughts. Mary's presence as Trish in the book lays down a gauntlet of how many representational perspectives I can employ to attempt to portray a very complex reality: who we were, together as a couple, and who we were individually as well. If Trish Webber emerges as the star presence in *Equations*, it is because I really did spend the most time with her, and because she was the occasion of my most profound experience both of falling in love, and of staying in love. I loved her. That having been said, some of the perspectives which develop around Trish are negative ones, too. For a relationship as intense as ours was, and we were very intensely involved indeed, this would seem to be inevitable. It is also worth saying that discerning readers of *Equations* will notice this; Trish, Mary, winds up looming over the text as something or someone ineluctable at the center. But it may be new data that the standing at the center quality Trish has in *Equations* was something real, authentic in my life. When I've done Mary in poetry, as in Otoliths 69, the instinct to compress, cut to the core is given more leg room. In both prose fiction and dialectics, the expansiveness of the text creates an effect of circumlocution which is difficult to avoid. Yet fiction, when done with skill, can represent a wider reality than poetry as well. *Equations* is not meant to be one long paean to Mary, but the composition of the book, as though it were a painting, brings her to life at the center by surrounding her with energy similar to hers, but not the same. She stands with, and against, others in the book. And to be noted that the center placement for her in *Equations* is deliberate, from my end, and earned as well.

Equations: *New Visions* on mp3

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Equations: *New Visions* features selections from the 2023 edition of *Equations*, emphasizing both re-worked portions and portions added to the text in 2023, here on mp3.

Chimes: New Visions on mp3

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Chimes: New Visions constitutes about 45% of the new edition of Chimes. Here it is on mp3.

Chimes: New Visions

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Chimes: New Visions offers selections, added in 2023, from Chimes second edition.

Chimes #31, #49 on P.F.S. Post

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Drunken early adolescent madness: Chimes #31, Chimes #49 on P.F.S. Post.

Poems

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From Dusie

Adam Fieled (Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, USA):...

From The Brownstone Review

More from Columbia Poetry Review

Adam Fieled (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvani...

From Tears in the Fence 60

From X-Peri

From Columbia Poetry Review 13

From Otoliths

From Poetry

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POETRY AND MORE

Post-Avant: A Meta-Narrative

Some time during the summer of 2009, I initiated a discourse on my blog, *Stoning the Devil*. The object of this discourse was to give the term "post-avant" concrete significations. "Post-avant" is a term with a mysterious history and an unknown etymology. Up until the discourse, no one had demonstrated the initiative to fix the term in place. That it signified, in some sense, contemporary experimental poetry, was well known; what, specifically, made post-avant poetry post-avant (rather than, say, Language poetry or Flarf) was not known. Prior to the composition of this discourse (which was very much interactive, in a "blog," virtual context) I had devised a definition of post-avant; I called it "the diasporic movement of Language poetry towards a new synthesis with narrative and erotic elements." I still find this to be, on some levels, a viable definition, but a little top-heavy and academic to use in a blog context (where the patience of deliberate reading habits is only slowly becoming common, both for readers and writers.) The wedge I used into this discourse was something more like a sound-bite in the American press; I defined post-avant as "anything with an edge." I feel ambivalent about this move now— if "diasporic movement" was top-heavy and academic, "edge" was vague and too catch-all. But I forged ahead with "edge," and the discourse took off. Largely through links placed on a number of blogs, the discourse gained hundreds of readers, but generated mostly critical comments. What I would like to do in this essay is explore some pieces of the discourse that still seem interesting, in a context (print anthology) that encourages patient reading and serious, formalized commentary. In the end, I believe that the post-avant discourse is more intriguing for bits and pieces it generated than for what it told its audience about this amorphous entity, "post-avant," which has still yet to generate currency or a strong foot-hold among a wide number of poets.

One primary issue that got addressed in passing, and that I find interesting, is the issue of movement-titles: specifically, whether they are ciphers or not. Here is how I chose to address the issue in the blog discourse:

Many people continue to complain that "post-avant," as a phrase, is meaningless, a cipher. I would not necessarily disagree that "post-avant," in and of itself, is a cipher, but I do not find this to be a problem…what does "post-modern," in and of itself, mean? Whatever comes after Modernism, whatever that happens to be? What about "Romanticism" or "Symbolism"?

Poems

From Dusie

Ephemera: beginning the work (1)

From The Brownstone Review

More from Columbia Poetry Review

Adam Fieled (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvani...

From Tears in the Fence 60

From X-Peri

From Columbia Poetry Review 13

From Otoliths

From Poetry

Return to

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In the heat of the moment, I neglected to mention poetry movements to which relevant appellations have been affixed, like Objectivism and Surrealism. Many people who commented had specific complaints about the term “post-avant”; that it is logically absurd, because it is impossible to be “post” whatever “avant” is. A more thoughtful take than the one I presented on my blog (or the responses my detractors offered) might walk a middle ground between these two responses; that literary appellations used to designate movements have a so-so success ratio, when measured in terms of their resonant power. It would be nice if self-conscious literary creators could aim for the upwards target, name their movements with a certain amount of caution and deliberation; but the lesson here may be that naming movements is generally a haphazard venture. Not everything that sticks, name-wise, sticks for a reason; the arbitrary nature of the signifier is applicant even in situations when (poets think) it should not be. Other issues that came up in the context of the discourse have even more rich complications, which will move us farther from post-avant and closer, I hope, to issues with more permanent relevance.

Here is a basic issue that came up repeatedly: to be an artist (rather than merely a poet) using poetry as a means of expression, how wide does one’s frame of reference need to be; to put it in another (perhaps more positive) light, what is the maximum range potential for poets (by range, I mean diversified knowledge of the arts, as arts)? I brought this up online, and I bring it up again here, because I believe that poets over the last forty years have lost something. I specifically designate fifty years because fifty years roughly corresponds to the advent of post-modernism which, despite the cipher status of its common name, has revolutionized the world of the visual arts (including film) while poetry has (arguably, at least in its mainstream manifestations) remained virtually untouched. What have been the manifestations of post-modernism in the visual arts? In large measure, straightforward painting has been marginalized, in favor of videos, installations, and conceptual pieces. In this case, it is not so much the forms but the import of the forms that matters— in these works, visual artists have made strides towards new definitions of space, bodies, sexuality, language, history, and the contentious relationship of art and politics. The only major poetry movement of the past fifty years that can make similar claims is Language poetry— however, I have seen little acknowledgement among Language poets of what these visual artists have achieved. This is important because the visual artists (from Warhol to Nauman) were mining this terrain for 15-20 years before the Language poets emerged in cohesive form in the 1980s. Moreover, visual artists like Warhol, Nauman, and more contemporary artists like Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, and Paul McCarthy have conquered the museums, galleries, and art-markets, while Language poetry remains barely acknowledged by mainstream poetry publishers, journals, and academies. In other words, the Language poets have been considerably less successful than the visual artists in disseminating their version of post-modernism, and were beat to the punch into the bargain. All this combines to give experimental poetry the look of a lag-behind. There are good reasons to support the notion that art-forms should not compete with each other. Nevertheless, the demarcations have become so pronounced that visual artists rarely even mention contemporary poetry. I (unabashedly) believe that this is a problem. It certainly cannot be rectified by one article, but it is an issue that deserves as much attention as any nascent poetry movement.

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I am proud that the discourse touched on levels more fundamental than “frames of reference” and “maximum range potentials.” I made the argument that two essential constituent elements of artistic process have a preponderant quality, which much experimental poetry has denied them: subjectivity and representation. Often, an emphasis has been placed on non-representational poetry, and the stance that manifestly subjective poetry imposes a kind of closure on poems-as-constructs. There is undoubtedly some truth to these positions, especially as regards mainstream verse, which tends to lean heavily on the subjectivity of poets as a perceived wellspring of universal wisdom. Representation becomes the tool by which this wisdom is revealed to the world. Dealing with poems that I called “post-avant” or “edgy” allowed me to open up the possibility that perhaps experimental poets have thrown out too much. Poets in this milieu tend to defend their aesthetic decisions by falling back on the tenets of Deconstructionism— that words, though arbitrary, are tactile and sensuous, capable of carrying the weight of poems, series of poems, and books, in and of themselves. I find this problematic, on several levels— firstly, because I do not enjoy engaging texts that preserve what I perceive to be myths about language (that the tactility of words is sufficient to justify a thematically, narratively, and affectively impoverished text); secondly, because contemporary experimental poets have failed to win a significant number of converts, either among the general public or among wide numbers of poets; thirdly, because new generations are rising up, that are looking for fresh perspectives and novel directions; as such, I would hope that rehashing the textual ethos of an earlier movement would not seem particularly interesting. Roland Barthes discusses the necessity of bits of narrative, bits of representation; as he says, “the text needs its shadow” (32)— the novels of Robbe-Grillet demonstrate how this can be done. There are few post-modern poetry texts that raise possibilities of intermittent subjectivity and representation to the apotheosis that a text like *Jealousy* does, and all too often these texts are simply evacuated of any traces of humanity. They tend to be hermetic, and exceedingly prudish. There is a definite perversity to denying the preponderance of subjectivity and representation, and not necessarily an endearing perversity. The truth is straightforward: words not charged with at least traces of subjectivity and representational import, words which are merely tactile, generally hold little pleasure for most audiences.

Once it is acknowledged that subjectivity and representation are, in some senses, preponderant, questions arise as to what should be represented and who should be representing it. Much of the poetry I was writing about is both overtly narrative and explicitly sexual— thus, I argued for post-avant as a movement with “sex at the center.” Central inclusion of sexuality in an art-movement seems so obvious in so many ways (sex having been at the center of most art-forms for the length of recorded history) that it may seem strange that I felt the need to argue for sex’s centrality. However, I feel that the new generation of experimental poets has been, in many senses, sanitized into frigidity by their teachers. So, like arguing that blinks should follow a poke in the eye, I argued for sex at the center of post-avant. The texts I used to posit this argument were ones like Brooklyn Copeland’s chapbook *Borrowed House*, which uses sex as one component part of a mosaic woven of desire, dark imagery, need for intimacy and impulses to confess (which never quite shade into the melodramatic bathos of Confessionalism.) The rag and bone shop of the heart that Yeats wrote of has all the durability and permanence (not to mention tactility) of words, with the added bonus that affect,

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sexuality, and their representations are not arbitrary. They are born out of lived experience, which is (willy-nilly) as preponderant as subjectivity and representation. “Write what you know” is a pretty hoary cliché— nevertheless, like most clichés, there is a grain of truth to it. Writing what you know does not necessitate the impartation of universal wisdom, or even an attempt to do so— we can know disjuncture, ellipse, torqued forms of narrativity— but it does presuppose the preponderance of subjectivity, that I continue to argue for. Hard as it is to believe, all these home-truths (some of which border, admittedly, on platitudes) have not been spoken in an experimental poetry context in decades. In earlier contexts, they would have all the surprise of a tautology or axiom; in 2010, I hope they may be relevant, even revelatory. All these are the what; as to the who, it is my conviction that any poet (male or female) should be able to write as much about sex as they wish. The only ideology that is useful for an artist is one of complete freedom. Special interest groups want political correctness; artists (and I do not mean to romanticize the status of artists) know that there is no “correctness” in politics or anywhere else. Correctness is relative, and “correct” for an artist is whatever forms conform to the myriad shapes of subjectivities that can be manifested in text.

The problem, as I see it, is that most poets currently writing in the English language approach poetry in a way consonant with what I call minor artist strategies. They let their texts be dictated by little rule books and primers they carry around; everything must be defined, everything must be spelled out. Approaches to representation and its sword-carrier, narrative, are decided beforehand; and those that do away with narrative do away with thematics into the bargain. Who wants to read poetry with no themes? Those who willfully obfuscate away from narrative build little but obsolescence into their poems. Likewise, those who take a hackneyed approach to narrative guarantee that their poems can be of no continuing interest, as invention is effaced from their discipline. That rare middle ground, where narrative approaches are concerned, in which invention is met by discipline, and old themes are endlessly refreshed, is only accessible to those who approach poetry like the major high art form it is. “Post-avant,” as I have defined it, is an ideal; it occupies the space wherein that rare middle ground approach to representation can be occupied and reoccupied. These issues may be pertinent to anyone who feels that the second half of century XX saw too much taken away too fast from English language poetry; and who want to see vistas open up that can lead our poetry back to the safety of danger, the middle ground of extremes, and the timeliness of permanence.

This piece originally appeared in the Penned in the Margins print anthology *Stress Fractures* in 2010.

Wordsworth and de Man: paper presented at Temple University (2006)

On the surface, there seems to be little common thread binding William Wordsworth’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Paul de Man’s *Criticism and Crisis*. The contextual circumstances that gave rise to each were radically divergent. Wordsworth was consciously, boldly inaugurating a new movement in

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British poetics, away from abstraction and impersonality and into the personal, candid, emotional realm that we are now familiar with as that of British Romanticism. His strategy was earnest and direct, his use of language purposeful and linear. Conversely, Paul de Man's Criticism and Crisis emerged right in the midst of a Deconstructionist and post-structuralist revolution. The terms of Deconstructionism, as applied to individual writers, necessitated that the "I," the constitutive subject, be subsumed. Rather than start his own counter-revolution, as Wordsworth might have done, de Man took on Deconstructionism on its own terms. There is no "I" in his piece, and the rules of the then au currant critical style were closely, carefully followed.

Nevertheless, a close reading of *Criticism and Crisis* reveals that de Man was, in fact, making a purpose-statement, in the manner of Wordsworth. Because convention precluded him from expressing himself in the first person, de Man resorted to a dizzyingly sophisticated use of irony and mirroring to make his points. That is, he used similar instances and subjects from the history of art and aesthetics to help make his aim clear. His central theme was the idea of the "crisis" as applied to literary criticism. De Man wanted to show that "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis"(8); in other words, that any new aesthetic reality forces a confrontation between a critic or audience and the innovative, challenging work. De Man's piece, as it was a reaction against the new aesthetic theories being touted by trend-hungry Continental critics, is itself also a crisis-statement. It is de Man's ironically rendered representation of a trend- created crisis. Likewise, Wordsworth's purpose-statement can also be seen as a crisis- statement. Wordsworth is not merely inaugurating British Romanticism; he is reacting against the "gaudiness and inane phraseologies"(77) of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. The aesthetic conventions of his era forced this crisis, as the critical conventions of de Man's era forced his.

Purpose-statements are personal; they give an artist or critic a chance to set forth a personal agenda. Crisis-statements are social; they involve the activities of many others, as perceived by the constitutive subject, and of the Zeitgeist. Wordsworth and de Man stand united in the impulse to achieve a dual aim; to set forth a personal, purposive agenda, and to frame it in the larger context of a crisis existent around them. For de Man, this dual aim is doubled by a need not only to refute trends, but to question the entire endeavor of literary criticism; Wordsworth, conversely, states his fundamental faith in poetry-as-literary endeavor.

Wordsworth, not constrained by a need to subsume his subjectivity, is able to present his personal agenda mostly unimpeded. He makes a novel claim for his poems and the language found therein; he is using the "real language of men"(76) to describe a universal interiority, how the mind "associates ideas in a state of excitement."(78) Wordsworth never completely defines what "real" language might be, except to associate it with "low and rustic life"(78), which for him signifies purity, lack of social vanity, and freedom from the distractions of urban life. Wordsworth's vision, though it makes claims on universality, is self-created; Wordsworth recognizes this, and his own limitations. His approach to the public display of his vision is cautious and calculated; he states his aim, which is

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quite ambitious, humbly; he will gauge the receptivity of the public to the real language of men, and in due course gauge how much pleasure “real language” can impart on receptive minds.

Implicit in Wordsworth’s claims for “real language” is a critique of the then- current modes of poetic production. Wordsworth feels himself surrounded by “deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.”(80) His stance is one of resistance against fashion, rebellion against prevailing trends, and isolation from the mainstream. In other words, once his purpose is stated, and with it his personal agenda, it becomes clear that he is also in the midst of a crisis. His social position is uncertain, and his feeling about his contemporaries ambivalent at best. This ambivalence plays itself out in a shifting discomfort that appears when Wordsworth is forced to address them; he is sometimes willing to lash out, then retreats behind a more even-handed “I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a different claim of my own.”(81) Always, the figure of an unseen, assumed reader looms large, and adds at least a modicum of self-consciousness to Wordsworth’s expressed subjectivity. The purely subjective, placed into a social mode of expression, is part and parcel of Wordsworth’s crisis. The purpose, easily stated and developed in solitude, becomes embattled and “crisis-like” when placed into the social context of a published preface.

De Man, unlike Wordsworth, chooses to begin with an explicit acknowledgement of crisis. The piece is titled *Criticism and Crisis*, which gives an indication that it will address salient contemporary issues in criticism. He quickly tells us that “well-established rules and conventions that governed the discipline of criticism…have been so badly tampered with that the entire edifice threatens to collapse.”(3) We are placed squarely within a social context; we do not yet know who is doing the tampering, but it is clearly (we assume) not the work of de Man himself. He presents himself to us, initially, in a reactive mode and stance. Yet it is not a stance, as with Wordsworth, of raw subjectivity; there is no “I” here. We know that a social nexus of critics is being addressed; we know that the situation is designated as “crisis-like”; but we do not get an immediate sense of how de Man posits himself in this scenario. Since use of “I”, in the context of an attempted Deconstructionist or post-structuralist statement, would seem blasphemous, de Man opts to use a “sideways” or “ironic” method to pursue his agenda.

De Man begins with a quote from Mallarme, which he then echoes. Just as Mallarme claimed that his French contemporaries had tampered with the rules of verse, so de Man claims that his Continental contemporaries have tampered with the rules of criticism. As the piece progresses, de Man seems to use Mallarme as a sort of mirror or double, a predecessor in an analogous situation. As such, everything that de Man says about Mallarme could equally be applied to de Man. The substantive, purposive element of this comparison occurs when de Man informs us that Mallarme is not really perturbed by what his contemporaries are doing. He “is using them as a screen, a pretext to talk about something that concerns him much more; namely, his own experiments with poetic language.”(7) Likewise, it would seem that de Man’s purpose in *Criticism and Crisis* is not to jump on any bandwagons or even to take sides in a public battle. His purpose is to talk about his own experiments with criticism. He wants to get to the heart of the matter, to address what criticism

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really consists of and whether it “is a liability or an asset to literary studies as a whole.”(8) What his contemporaries may or may not be doing is a detour, albeit a necessary and unavoidable one. Their battling and bickering serves to demonstrate what may happen when self-scrutiny becomes lost, and this becomes useful to de Man as a means of representing his purpose.

For both Wordsworth and de Man, historical awareness is paramount. Both take a long view of their respective disciplines, believing that historical awareness adds depth and gravitas to vision. To situate their endeavors in time is part of their purpose, and a lack of historical awareness among their contemporaries is part of the perceived crises. However, each must adopt a different strategy in order to effectively present a historical case for themselves. The pre-Romantic milieu in which Wordsworth was working put an emphasis on the objective, the impersonal. For Wordsworth to break through this wall, he had to adopt what was then an unconventional strategy. He dared to be personal, thus inaugurating a new era. Conversely, de Man conformed to the anti-subjectivist standards that surrounded post-structuralist discourse. Only then was he able to make his points in such a way that they would be listened to, possibly heeded. De Man’s submission to the trends of his day, however, were merely apparent. Through the use of irony, and through the indirect use of himself as constitutive subject, he was able to historicize himself, his purpose of self-scrutiny and the crises both within his own consciousness and without.

Within his piece, de Man, unlike Wordsworth, is willing to stoop to self- contradiction. First he tells us that the entire critical edifice may be collapsing, owing to conflicts on the Continent. Then he remarks that “we have some difficulty taking seriously the polemical violence with which methodological issues are being debated in Paris.”(5) So, almost immediately there is a sense, within this contradiction, that de Man is being subversive, and that his seeming dismay at his contemporaries’ flightiness is intended ironically. He is indulging in self-contradiction in order to achieve his purpose, part of which may be to put the Continental critics in their place. Indeed, he tells us that the authority of the best historians can be invoked to show that “what was considered a crisis in the past often turns out to be a mere ripple.”(6) De Man’s view of history, as seen in this piece, is cyclical. It is not that changes do not transpire; it is that they transpire slowly and almost invisibly. Thus, part of the crisis he is rebelling against is an attitude of shallow, ill-considered fickleness. It turns out that de Man’s crisis-statement is two-pronged; he castigates literary poseurs for their lack of historical awareness, even as he notes that the utility of literary criticism has not been proven conclusively. The first crisis applies to him, as an outsider looking in; the second is generally operative, and it applies to him directly. Just as Wordsworth makes universal claims for the utility of poetry, de Man makes universal claims *against* the utility of criticism, or shows that its utility must be proven and scrutinized.

On this level, it is interesting to note that the analogues de Man chooses to act as his shadows or doubles are not critics; Mallarme is a poet, Husserl a philosopher, Levi-Strauss, a structural anthropologist. Further, it is remarkable to note that not once in *Criticism and Crisis* does de Man mention one of the Continental critics whom he is taking to task. He mentions Sartre, Poulet,

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Starabinski, stars of an earlier era; but those who have created the seeming crisis that de Man is addressing remain unnamed (just as de Man, himself, does.) This returns to the fact that de Man is naming a crisis that exists to him only ostensibly. The more profound crisis is whether criticism, once scrutinized, retains any meaning. Historicity becomes a method whereby de Man, rather than making claims for criticism, sees the cycle of crises and purposes that defines any kind of literary creation. The final question as to the ultimate validity or non-validity of criticism is never addressed directly, but merely suggested. This suggestion constitutes a substantial part of de Man's purpose, just as his contemporaries neglect of the question forms part of the crisis.

Wordsworth's approach to historicity, like most angles of his approach, is more direct, less convoluted than de Man's. Wordsworth is a poet, concerned with poetry; when he looks for analogues, in the context of a discussion of metrical language, he thinks of "the age of Catullus, Terence, and Lucretius, and that of Statius or Claudian; and in our own country, in the age of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, and that of Donne and Cowley, or Dryden, or Pope."(77) What we have here is a variety of implicit assumptions, none of which can be found in de Man. Wordsworth seemingly believes that poetry is an art-form valid both through history and in his present; that there is a stable canon of great work that can be relied upon unquestioningly; that knowledge of this canon is essential; and that Wordsworth, himself, is going to attempt to join the ranks of canonized, historically important poets. Wordsworth's tremendous advantage over de Man, in making a purpose-statement, is that he does not have to resort to subversion, irony, and self-contradiction. On the other hand, his straightforward subjectivity leaves him open to accusations of pomposity and complacency.

There is, in fact, a note of complacency running through Wordsworth's preface. He idealizes the poet as a being "endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind."(81) This attitude aids and abets Wordsworth in delivering the purposive element of his preface; he believes in the "poet", as an idealized figure, in the same manner that he believes in "poetry". Thus, he seems to suffer comparatively little cognitive dissonance regarding his agenda, and his ability to express himself and his purpose. His faith in the "inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind"(80) gives his address assurance, and his tone rarely wavers from this measured, assured calm. When "crisis" issues arise, i.e. when Wordsworth mentions his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, he does not slip into another register, but maintains a dignified, even keel. We are able to infer from this that if a "battle" of sorts should take place for domination of British poetics, Wordsworth is confident of victory. Wordsworth sees a crisis all around him, and is able to name the crisis, and talk of how it must be overcome, but it does not seem to concern him overmuch. His tone is that of an already privately established eminence waiting to be crowned with conventionally-earned laurel. He sees his isolation as a temporary condition and waits without haste for the world to come to him.

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Circumstances, of course, proved Wordsworth to be correct. His eminence grew to be widely recognized, he was eventually made laureate, his avowed purpose was embraced by many poets, and the poetic crisis of “false refinement” and “arbitrary innovation”(79) resolved itself in the birth of British Romanticism. Consequently, a certain amount of complacency might have been justified. However, it could be argued that a lack of rigor makes many of Wordsworth’s claims untenable. Coleridge, for example, was disturbed by Wordsworth’s claim to the “real language of men”, “real language” not being definable or discussable by any objective measure. Such claims formed an essential part of Wordsworth’s purpose— to stake a claim for poetry as universal truth, “carried alive into the heart by passion.”(82) The sort of rigorous and unstinting self-scrutiny advocated by de Man is not part of Wordsworth’s agenda. It may be that, as this preface was not his idea, but that of his friends who “advised me to prefix a systematic defense”(76), he did not feel the need to question himself, as he might have were it a poem.

De Man, unburdened (at least on the surface) with complacency or egotism, makes no claims for criticism, universal or personal. His purpose, discernible beneath the twists, turns, ironies and meta-ironies, is to stake a claim for self-scrutiny, on all levels. Following in the footsteps of Mallarme, who is seen to be “ironical”(16), de Man suggests that the act of writing must question itself at every turn; “all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis.”(8) Yet, de Man takes another detour, to an unlikely destination. He uses a lecture by Husserl to demonstrate that “the rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error.”(16) Though never explicitly stated, we can use these two statements to make an inductive leap; if all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis, and if the rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error, then all true (and rhetorically based) criticism must be erroneous! It must be noted that this inductive leap is never made by de Man himself. It is left in wait for the attentive reader. The irony is that this passionate plea for self-scrutiny in criticism should suggest (albeit indirectly) that criticism, once scrutinized, may lose all meaning.

Had Wordsworth wanted to make this point, he would have spelled it out explicitly. However, the context that de Man is working in precludes him from doing this. For the Deconstructionists, Romanticism, of which Wordsworth is so salient a representative, was the enemy. Any hint of egotism or complacency would be pounced upon and used to discredit the subject. Yet, it was clearly de Man’s intention to make this point, by whatever means available. He notes that “in the language of polemics the crooked path often travels faster than the straight one.”(14) This must, of necessity, be the path he takes. Because it is not stated overtly, de Man must hope that his audience is subtle enough to catch the purpose behind his twists and turns. Likewise, de Man must hope that his enemies, those who have created the crisis we encounter at the beginning of the piece, and who are never openly named, will appreciate the self-scrutiny that has led de Man to his rigorous conclusion; that nothing in literature can be taken for granted, and that literature itself might be a kind of nothingness.

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Here, we have two apparently simple designations: Wordsworth, the Romantic egotist, spelling out a personal purpose and reacting to crisis in a personal way; de Man, the objective Deconstructionist, subsuming subjectivity both in stating a purpose and reacting to a crisis. However, beneath the surface, things may not be so simple. Wordsworth, reacting as he is against objective modes of creation that (he feels) have grown stale, is using bare subjectivity to spell out a new vision. Subjectivity becomes the most attractive expedient, the shortest distance between what was and what may be. It is being purposefully used, and with self-consciousness. Complacency creeps in specifically because Wordsworth knows himself to be doing something original. Had Wordsworth's ego been subsumed, his entire construct would collapse, and he would not be making an original statement. His crisis would remain untouched, his purpose unstated. In the contextual framework of early nineteenth century Britain, nothing could have been more revolutionary or revelatory than a lone, rebellious subject taking a bold stand against trends that had prevailed for decades.

Likewise, De Man's lack of subjectivity, his apparent objectivity, is a carefully crafted illusion. De Man speaks of using the language of polemics, because *Criticism and Crisis* is polemical. It is a personal statement based on a subjective experience, both of criticism as a personal, purposive endeavor, and of criticism as it exists in de Man's social milieu. This milieu is being dogged by crisis, and a crisis (of false refinement and arbitrary innovation) that closely resembles the one that Wordsworth is enumerating in his preface. Because de Man is not self-consciously inaugurating a new era but reacting against one, his strategy seems to be to outdo the Continental critics at their own game. His "I" is so cleverly concealed that, far from seeming like a "privileged consciousness"(9), it seems evanescent. Yet multiple re-readings of *Criticism and Crisis* reveal an "I" that is fluid, mercurial, and capable both of enumerating a two-pronged crisis (the fickleness of Continental critics and the uncertainty of criticism as a discipline) and stating a two-pronged purpose (to show that fickleness in criticism is fruitless and to show equally the need for continued self-scrutiny). In a way, de Man's circuitous technique could be seen as even more egotistical than Wordsworth's. There is an element of dazzle to de Man's performance that is lacking in Wordsworth. De Man demonstrates that he can use irony, mirroring, and deliberate self-contradiction to craft a statement that is as essentially personal as Wordsworth's preface. He is beating the Continental critics at their own "unprivileged" game, demystifying them in such a way that at no point does he reveal himself as the dreaded, Romantic subject. Yet every point he makes moves forward the argument that it is not the Romantic subject to be guarded against, but a contradictory awareness of literature as a "something that is really nothing". De Man might choose to designate literature as a "nothing that may or may not be something".

There does remain one fundamental discrepancy between Wordsworth and de Man: their attitude towards language itself. This discrepancy was largely determined by the eras in which they lived; Wordsworth, right at the dawn of Romanticism, had no notion of words as arbitrary signs, nor that the connection between thing and word, signified and signifier, might be flawed or, worse, non-existent. When Wordsworth addresses language itself, he does so in such a way to reinforce the impression that he believes words are capable of "pure" signification. Wordsworth mentions "in

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what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other"(76-77), in the context of a complaint as to the general taste of the British public. We do not see Wordsworth questioning the inherent value of linguistic signification; we see him questioning the uses to which linguistic signification can be put. If language is seen to be stable, reliable, and just to the expressive intent of the human subject, then an attitude of confident self- righteousness would seem to be, if not admirable, at least understandable. Wordsworth does not doubt that he can make clear his purposive agenda, nor that he can spell out the crisis in British taste as he sees it. His trust in language, and in his own expressive capacities, seems secure. For Wordsworth, language may be purified and simplified by a retreat into rural simplicity; the language of rural people "is adopted… because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived."(78) Rather than admit of fundamental duplicities or confusions, Wordsworth advocates reducing language to its barest essentials. Here, there is likely to be less static between sign and meaning, less needless ornamentation. This simplification of language forms part of Wordsworth's purpose, just as the ornate, "gaudy" language of his predecessors forms part of the perceived crisis he is counteracting. Once simplified, language need not be scrutinized. This bedrock belief in the power and reliability of signification is part of what allows Wordsworth to be so straightforward. Purpose and crisis can be equally addressed, an even keel may be maintained, and faith in the ultimate triumph of truth and nature (both, in this context, assumed universals) are demonstrated. Wordsworth enacts the discourse of the privileged subject, making a singular claim for his finite notions of truth, in precisely the manner that de Man eschews.

For de Man, things must be more complicated. In the post-Saussurian era, faith in language, even simplified language, had been drastically reduced. The arbitrary quality of the linguistic sign had become a guiding precept for both Structuralism and Decontsructionism. De Man works with the knowledge that every discourse falls prey to "the duplicity, the confusion, and the untruth that we take for granted in the everyday use of language."(9) The kind of self-scrutiny that de Man is advocating would seem to preclude the confident vigor of Wordsworth's tone and literary demeanor. De Man's complete awareness, both of his own situation as a contemporary critic and of the situation of his Continental colleagues, allows him room to maneuver, to use the trends and tenor of his times to make a personal claim on, if not universal truth, at least enduring value. Whether there is a direct correlation between universal truth (the legitimacy of which took a beating, alongside linguistic signage, as the Structuralist movement developed) and enduring value is not, for de Man, the point. What de Man is demonstrating, with just as much confidence and vigor as Wordsworth (though sans the "I", and the directness that it lends), is that certain situations and circumstances tend to repeat themselves, that trends pass, and that the self-scrutiny which "scrutinize(s) itself to the point of reflecting on its own origin"(7) has a value. De Man does not posit this value as universal; he does not need to. The very fact of Mallarme's speech to an English audience at Oxford in 1894, the nature of Mallarme's ironies, his twists, turns, and ability to turn trends and fickleness to his own ends in a sort of charade, show de Man (and, by implication, his readers) that Nietzsche's "eternal return" might apply to aesthetics as to all other things. The end of Mallarme's charade is

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adopted by de Man; to sneak “enduring value” (for want of a better, less authoritative sounding term) in through the back door, via irony. Through adopting Mallarme’s stance, de Man gets to have his cake and eat it too; he makes a personal purpose-statement without ever using the first person, while revealing a seeming crisis to be a trifle (and one with many antecedents in the history of literature.) Mallarme becomes a Virgil figure (albeit a highly ironical one), leading de Man through the dark wood of conflict, into the open air of disciplined thought.

As this “air of disciplined thought” entails a fundamental ambivalence or uncertainty towards de Man’s chosen discipline, this metaphor might be misleading. Better, perhaps, to say that de Man’s Mallarmean mask allows him to tell the truth (or, at least, his version of the truth). Wordsworth does not feel compelled to wear a mask. His only artifice involves the use of rhetoric to make his perceived crisis clear and his purpose known. His famous “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”(79) seems more rhetorical than reality based. “All”, in this context, universalizes a sentiment that, in its time, might have seemed shocking. It would be difficult to imagine *Paradise Lost* as a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, or *The Rape of the Lock*. Wordsworth exaggerates the aspects of his argument that make him seem singular, atomized, and extraordinary. The exaggerations are subtle, but they color the entire enterprise of the preface.

Perhaps this is the essential similarity between Wordsworth and de Man, as reflected in these two pieces: both feel the need to make calculated overstatements. De Man’s “all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis” is mirrored by Wordsworth’s “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” These two pieces are joined, not only by the need to assert a purpose and a crisis, but by the ambition to be bold, to think big. These are pieces written to be read. They demonstrate a keen awareness of an assumed audience, and both display a sense of intellectual showmanship, a certain bravura quality. These two figures, writing to such different ends and audiences in such radically dissimilar eras, are showing us (one through earnestness, one through irony) how a literary gauntlet might be laid down. Judging by the intense reaction these pieces received, de Man and Wordsworth both succeeded at meeting their divergent, contradictory, but not entirely dissimilar goals.

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Elucidating Derrida and Differance: Lecture given at Temple University (2006)

"We provisionally give the name "difference" to this sameness which is not identical."

Derrida's concept "differance" has its basis in contradiction. What Derrida is essentially "doing," though he might balk at the notion that formulating "differance" could be "doing" anything, is moving Saussure's theories of language into an expanded realm, that might be said to include the ontological, or the metaphysical, or both (or neither.) As we remember, Saussure, in founding Structuralism with his *Course in General Linguistics*, posited that "in languages there are only differences," i.e. all phonemes and other elements of language take their identity from all other phonemes and language elements, and are defined relationally rather than individually. Derrida is telling us that in naming "differance" through a displacement of "e" to "a", he is, among other things, broadening the parameters of Saussure's insight beyond language and linguistic signs. The play of differences, Derrida tells us, is operational in every human sphere, and in all situations in which entities/substances/essences are perceived or intuited. All things are perceived and identified through the principle of "difference," i.e. all things take their meaning (in the broadest sense) from other things from which they differ. By taking Saussure's theory out of linguistics and casting it in a more expansive light, Derrida posits a "relative universe" in which individual identity, as "owned" by a constitutive and constituting subject, becomes problematic as it is seen that identity is structured out of "difference," plays of difference.

Derrida's use of the word "provisionally" is important. It signifies a temporary condition, an impermanent usage. This sets Derrida apart from earlier philosophers, like Nietzsche and Heidegger, who were much more definite and authoritative in their pronouncements. The conditions by which post-Structural thought was created entailed a radical rethinking of writing, the author, authority, and "privilege," so that once the individual, with his/her constitutive ego, was reduced by "differance" to a sort of "liminal limbo," the act of writing, creating signs, and setting forth a specific "play of differences" became fraught with all sorts of complications and limitations that made every claim "provisional." If not just language but people exist in a "play of differences", and if this state is marked out by a permanent condition of "difference," then how can any given "person" (and person does, in this context, need quotation marks) claim to use linguistic signs with authority? "Differance" is operative on people, and on language too, so that when a person attempts to use language instrumentally, a "double bind" inevitably and invariably arises. Even naming this bind is a double bind, or maybe a triple bind; the constitutive subject, the linguistic sign, and the anti-concept/anti-word "differance" all chafe against an attempted "stranglehold by definition" in linguistic signage. Thus, the language of qualification becomes imperative. Derrida cannot strangle "differance" into submission; it is too evanescent, too ungraspable; he must talk "around" it, and everything he says

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must be qualified and guarded against facile usage that guarantees misunderstanding. In fact, any claim to completely grasp “differance” would, to Derrida, seem fraudulent, because there is nothing to grasp, or a mere phantom. “Differance” exists, or has its being, or its “charged non-existence,” in a crepuscular wilderness of shadows. If Derrida is to use language instrumentally, his strategy (and Derrida emphasizes in this article the importance of strategy and risk when dealing with “differance”) must be equivocation. It is not that “differance” is ineffable, but that once it is signified, it ceases to be visible. To use a quote from Wittgenstein, it cannot be “said,” it may only, possibly, be “shown.” Although, to be fair, it cannot really be shown either, as it may lie beyond our capacity for understanding. Thus, equivocation becomes the only means by which Derrida can avoid falling into the traps of authoritatively secure language, which is seen, ultimately, to be anything but secure. Equivocation is also the best way to deal with a “sameness which is not identical,” i.e. a process and a quality that are omnipresent where being, beings, and forms of communication persist, but which takes its expression through both the individual properties of any given entity and properties (or concepts or signs) shared between entities.

“Differance is neither a word nor a concept.”

This gets to the heart of the matter, and, revealingly, the heart of the matter turns out to be a negative proposition. A fundamental duality within “differance” reveals itself, in that Derrida has created a word which he claims is not a word. Either this is a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, or Derrida is once again equivocating against authorial authority, his own constitutive subject-ness, and the signifying confines of language perpetually caught in a synchronic (and, for many readers, hermeneutic) circle. If nothing else, Derrida can be said to be consciously moving a piece on Saussure’s chess-board. It might even be more accurate to say that he is stealing a piece, and in fact Derrida does at one point in this article use the analogy of a king about to be killed. “Differance” is seen to be not a word because Derrida posits “differance” as what happens *between* words. That is, “differance” is the play of differences by which words and phonemes define themselves, but because it is impossible to define this “play” without tautologically referring back to it, “difference,” in the negative space where it finds its definition, cannot be signified. Yet, for Derrida to lay this particular card on the table, it *must* be signified. We see that Derrida is playing the “sign-game” with the not-fortuitous and irrevocable knowledge that no victory is possible. If “differance” had to be defined and given “entity-status,” we would call it a “negative entity.” Just as words, things, and people cannot exist or subsist without other words, things, and people, “differance” has no positive existence (or Derrida might say, no existence at all) outside the context of a world inhabited by contingencies and contingent beings. Were Derrida to authoritatively call “differance” a word, he would be claiming for it the kind of pawn-on-the-chessboard existence that Saussure posits for words within his schema of the word-as-sign.

Saussure, we remember, claims that words consist of the signifier, a sound image, and the signified, a concept. Once “differance” leaves the negative space where it belongs and becomes a sound-image, among thousands of other sound-images, it is no longer “difference.” “Differance” itself, as a sound-image, becomes something on which “differance” acts, from a place outside of “difference.” As

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nothing can act on itself from outside of itself, this is a logical absurdity. Derrida feels doubly absurd about this, as he is the one forcing “differance” to act on “differance” from outside itself, by naming it. So, Derrida only feels comfortable in the authoritative role when he puts forth something he knows is contradictory, and, possibly, absurd.

Were Derrida a strict Saussurian and nothing else, he might feel settled about positing “concept status” for “difference.” After all, an unnamed concept that is “talked around” still might avoid the play of differences that Saussure enumerates in language. However, because Derrida is not merely following Saussure’s precepts but radically extending them, and because this extension takes Saussure’s claims for language and applies them to many other things, we see that differance-as-concept is no more or less absurd than differance-as-sign. Derrida sees that concepts, like linguistic signs, are acted upon by differance, defined by what they have or lack in relation to other concepts. If differance were a concept, we would again see the logical absurdity of differance acting on differance from outside itself. Thus, on a theoretical level (differance-as-concept), as well as on a material one (differance-as-sign), Derrida is forced by the difficulty of his construct to hedge bets. Differance must be both a sound-image and a concept, and a non-sound-image and a non-concept. In both states of being, positive and negative, differance has no identity other than that of a differentiating phantom.

“Differance indicates the closure of presence…effected in the functioning of traces.”

Things present themselves to us, generally and initially, as discrete totalities. If we read a poem by Baudelaire, we (hopefully) focus our attention on it, to the exclusion of all other things. The poem grips us as we gradually apprehend its totality. We might read it once, twice, or three times. It is present to us, becomes our present moment within a surfeit of our attention. During this time-period, we do not think relationally about the poem. It is simply there, in front of us, a series of linguistic signs conspiring to present an impression of discreet totality-within-presence. However, the discreet totality of a poem by Baudelaire, or any work of art, or anything that rivets our attention, is eventually and inevitably mediated by differance. “Differance” indicates the “closure of presence” because when it begins to infiltrate our perceptions, we notice “traces,” parts of whatever we happen to be perceiving, which remind us that the perceived totality of our object is in fact an illusion, and that what we perceive exists, as all things do, only relationally. If we happen to be reading a poem, we think of other poems, other poets, other times we have seen words used in the poem in other places, etc. Once this process begins, our object ceases to be “present” to us, and the energy that constitutes “present encounters” dissipates and diffuses. “Traces” are important for Derrida because they are a constant reminder of “difference,” and that “presence” as such is easily closed in a relational, differentially-aware consciousness. “Traces” are perceived differently by different people, but the process by which traces “close presence” (i.e. the way we notice traces of things in other things, traces of words in other words, etc.) is consistent.

Simply put, we do not perceive things individually. Everything that is perceived by us leads us to perceptions that mediate initial impressions, which continue to be mediated for as long as we

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perceive a given object. The process of mediation is internal, and means that when it begins (and it begins almost immediately), the object perceived is no longer wholly present to us. “Differance” thus distorts (though a less pejorative term like “mediates” might do just as well) our contact with things, diffuses our ability to focus. When we are not “present” for the objects we perceive, when “traces” lead us to think relationally about objects, we have entered the “ghost-world” wherein “differance” exerts sovereign influence and where subjectivity is lost in shadows. It leads us out of the present, and we see that when Derrida brings in a spatio-temporal dimension to the discussion of “difference,” this is partly where he is leading us. For Derrida, “differance” places things in time, because where we are in time has to do with our “relational state,” how we are placed in relation to other things, how we and the world around us are “sequenced.”

“Signification: differance of temporalizing”

In this way, Derrida demonstrates that signification is a way of creating a sense of time passing. When we talk, we talk “in time,” as a way of “marking time,” i.e. summarizing “states of affairs” as they exist in a moment, or, depending on the context, many moments. We are able to demarcate, with linguistic signs, what “now” is and consists of, what “then” was and consisted of, etc. It is primarily through language, and other forms of signification, Derrida argues, that we are able to do this. Things that we place with linguistic signs are always placed “in time,” so to speak, and so the play of differences as they exist between moments are expressed in language. Again, a “meta” dimension creeps into Derrida’s thinking; the constitutive subject, the dialect, and the moment being expressed are subject to “differance” simultaneously and on both similar and different levels; thus, our attempts to place states of affairs in time are mediated by the play of differences in language and in the constitutive subject as well. Every human utterance is “timed”; it takes a certain amount of forethought to plan and a certain amount of time to say or write. What is expressed in speaking or writing is the creation of a moment among moments, a statement among statements, possibly a summation among summations. There is no way to escape the relativity and contingency of a world bound every which way by differance. Now that Saussure has been moved out of the confines of language and into the broader realities of space and time, we see that “in language there are only differences” might become “in the world of perceptible reality there are only differences.” If this is acknowledged and accepted as fact, it is easy to see why post-Structuralism and Deconstructionism would argue against the belief in the reality of a discreet, closed, unmediated subjectivity.

On the other hand, the very act of “accepting” a philosophical precept as fact becomes in and of itself problematic. Facts are closed entities, or are held as such by the constitutive subject. “Differance”, ghost though it may be, seems to open things up so that the very act of accepting it as a fact, or even calling it “it,” would belie Derrida’s intention. Because Derrida must equivocate, because “differance” is seen to be neither a word nor a concept, Derrida might’ve known that “intention”, as such, did not apply to his concept. “Intention” implies the kind of constitutive, authoritative self-hood that Derrida is negating. It is an irony that “differance” seems to have been no less confounding to its creator than it remains to us today. This probably accounts for Derrida’s admission in this piece that differance is a “difficult, confusing” concept. If in the perceptible world

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there are only differences, and if this applies to language as part of the perceptible world, and also to any constitutive subject, we are forced to recognize the nothingness, or near-nothingness, of human perception and hence human will. “Differance” may be seen as a ghost or a kind of haunting, a binding which no one and nothing can undo. On the other hand, a more positive reading of “differance” might say that it is a mode of spiritual development, of getting beyond the confines of ego and subjectivity and into a more realistic realm, albeit one mediated by a ghost. It would be nice to conclude with a definitive statement, but that would seem inappropriate to this text. All that remains is to place this moment in time through language, and so, with apologies for any authoritative utterance, I end here.

Adam Fieled, October 16, 2006

Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Bob Perelman (Mt. Airy, Philadelphia, USA), Adam Fieled (Logan Square, Philadelphia, USA) (2005)

AF: I was very touched by the intimacy and playfulness of the poems in *Playing Bodies*. The poems are all written in a unique, spare, lyrical voice. Could you talk a little bit about how this voice developed?

BP: I feel like I did something I hadn't done before in that book, and I was really very knocked out by Francie [Shaw]'s paintings. For a couple of years before I wrote the poems, I'd been thinking of trying to do a collaboration with her based on those paintings. We had collaborated in the past. I was very involved in the production of the paintings, in that I would see each one that she was doing, we would talk about which postures worked best. For a few of them I made suggestions (like, turn this guy upside down, etc.) I'm not claiming much credit for the paintings, just to say that I was engrossed, as she was making them. So I'd been thinking about, how would I write poems of or for those paintings, and I tried quite a bit. At first I tried to imitate them formally in some way. The canvases are square, so I tried to write square poems— four quatrains of four word lines, and I think I even (one or two times) arranged them in two columns, really trying to make them square like the paintings. I wasn't terribly happy with the result. Then I concentrated on a more emotional level, and the paintings made me feel all sorts of things— scenarios, moods, tones of voice. I would show my attempts to Francie, and she often told me I was seeing only half of the painting. She was clear that the two figures were one gesture or mood or state of mind. She wanted to make sure I tried to get those complexities into the poems, and that helped me turn the corner. At some point, I really started to allow myself to say emotionally complicated, contradictory things. I opened up to the spirit of the paintings. Once I got onto that frequency, things went much faster, and I'd often write a couple a day, after working for more than a year on trying to approach them. Once they were written, I tried to cut things way down. That was getting back to the original impulse— to imitate the paintings' formality. The paintings are incredibly compact, so I had to make the poems as compact as I could. That was something new for me— writing short poems.

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AF: Talking about models— as I was reading *Playing Bodies*, I often thought of e.e. cummings. Was he in there somewhere?

BP: It may not be fair, but cummings has been on my shit list for decades. I liked him a lot when I was young. He was one of the first poets I ever liked, so I suppose possibly he's influenced me subconsciously. I have problems with his sentimentality and his anti-Semitism. I cut Pound incredible slack because I understand the mechanics of his anti-Semitism. For some reason I don't cut cummings any slack at all. He rubs me the wrong way.

AF: You write, "Aliens have inhabited my aesthetics for/ decades..." It seems that in many poems, "Confession" here quoted being the most obvious example, you try and balance the post-modernist's rejection of confession and the Romantic's penchant for same. Do you think this is relevant or applicable? If so, would you like to talk a little bit about this binary and the tensions it creates in your writing? Is there, perhaps, a kinship with John Ashbery lurking around this territory for you?

BP: I know that I was being (on the surface) sarcastic, transgressive, contrary in writing that poem. It was the sly thought of adopting a so-called alien perspective, naive alienation. The "slimier-than-thou-aestheticians" are the indirect result of my having taken my boys to see *Independence Day*, where the aliens are decidedly slimy.

AF: You've made it clear that, as a poet, you try and avoid "elemental words." Could you discuss elemental words? Does elemental merely mean overused or trite, or is there something more subtle being denoted?

BP: Elemental words are essentializing words, words that are meant to be deeper than language— often geo-political racial stuff, i.e. "American," etc. "I am American and you're not." It's transcendental tags that get used all the time. For me, making poetry lively and healthy involves teasing and tweaking, challenging the notion of the poetic, not being worshipful. So "elemental" in unchangeable— you're not allowed to change it. I didn't think of that way of saying it— "elemental"— until I was writing the introduction to *Ten to One*. "Elemental" isn't an elemental word for me.

AF: You're quoted as saying, "poets most usefully exist in hearing the variety of society's speech and responding to that variety." I was wondering if you could explore this a little bit— what, for you, is the richest societal domain a poet can mine— streets, bars, universities?

BP: All of the above, I suppose. As many as possible, although you have to do a lot of translating sometimes. Putting different language universes in touch with each is a basic necessity these days. There has to be the barest hint of a hinge between one side of a language universe and another. The world of books is not unpoetic and the street is not unpoetic, and if I use bookish words, I try to make a hinge or an articulation so that you know what I'm talking about. If it's too explanatory then it gets very cumbersome, but I think there's a value in doing it if you can do it deftly, and it can be a real source of strength.

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AF: In your poem "Days," you write, "Some days you skip/ Come back to them/ Later, others never occur." In a compressed way, these lines seem to posit a sort of Proustian view of time. I often get that feeling from your poems— of time being essentially elusive, untraceable. The poems, then, are an attempt at tracing how time-parts fit together. Is there any truth is this reading?

BP: That seems like a good description. It is something I think about all the time— the present moment of writing. It strikes me that poetry, though not ephemeral, is thrown into the present more so than other activities. It's the most old-fashioned art. Again, it's a tricky balance, a question of deftness. I have a prejudice against "poetic piety."

AF: I noticed that the Ezra Pound segment of *The Trouble With Genius* seemed very deeply felt. Is there a sense of deep affinity with Pound? Does this affinity make it difficult to face his sketchy-at-best politics?

BP: Pound was one of the crucial poets in the dawning of my interest in poetry. Somehow, I got hold of *ABC of Reading* when I was a kid. It made poetry seem very doable and fascinating, like, "what could be more interesting than this?" I came to poetic consciousness at the tail end of the New American Poetry world, and that's a "New Directions" world, all of Pound's work coming out of New Directions. It's a sanitary presentation of Pound. It was possible to read him and not get that he's a Fascist or an anti-Semite. You can read right past it and you can see he's being irascible, and you're never quite sure what or who he's irascible at, and the systematic nature of his prejudices doesn't show up. I realized at a certain point that it organized his thinking, anti-Semitism. When Pound came to London— Ezra is a very Jewish name, and he had red hair—he was always telling people, "I'm not Jewish, I'm not Jewish." It became very important to me to figure out what was going on with Pound, because he instigated (that's his word, ultimately) much of what was important to me personally and to most American poetry.

AF: Do you ever suffer spasms of doubt about the importance of poetry and art in general? Is the Samuel Beckett syndrome ("I can't go on, I'll go on") once that you can empathize with?

BP: Yes, I certainly suffer spasms of doubt. I don't have spasms of doubt about the importance of poetry: there, I am a true believer. I suffer spasms of doubt about my own poetry. I'm not a happy camper when a poem isn't finished. I remind myself that I have written stuff that I like.

AF: Lately I've been messing around with the concept *rhetopoeia*. This, for me, is the rhetorical impact of any given poem, how it convinces us of its own substantiality. Do you think poems need this sort of justification? Does a poem need to convince us, on a rhetorical level, that it is somehow necessary or justified in its existence?

BP: I'm suspicious of generalizations. I've used the word "rhetoric" a bunch— rhetoric as a source of poetic power. But it's one of the easiest words to misunderstand. Rhetoric is also a synonym of "bullshit!" But rhetoric in the old sense— structures used in addressing a single person, or a group of people, or a situation, when that's what rhetoric means— remains crucial. The environments in which

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poems exist are so complicated and fast moving that sometimes when every poem is "convincing us of its own substantiality," it feels like endless playings of the authenticity card. Like in "Confession": "Come on and read me for the inner you I've locked onto with my cultural capital sensing-device looks...") Sometimes the best rhetoric (in the sense that I think you're using it) is not worrying about rhetoric. But poems never escape the environment of reading and writing. So, no final answer to the question.

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The Semantic Limitations of Visual Poetry (2009): Jeffrey Side

In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, **Louise Rosenblatt** says: 'The poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a co-penetration, of a reader and a text.' She later elaborates:

The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader. This suggests the possibility that printed marks on a page may even become different linguistic symbols by virtue of transactions with different readers. Just as knowing is the process linking a knower and a known, so a poem should not be thought of as an object, an entity, but rather as an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text.

For the poem to be experienced as an event in time, the importance of mental activity, or "internalization," in the reader cannot be overestimated. By internalization I mean that part of the reader's response that is able, through conscious decision, to minimize the relevance of the text in the hermeneutical process. This is difficult to achieve with poetry in which the artifice (in the form of certain extra-lexical ingredients—such as the visual and acoustic) is fore-grounded at the expense of semantic elements. Such poetry inhibits internalization and is, as **Charles Bernstein** has said, 'concerned only with representing its own mechanisms.'

These elements of artifice are, like painting and music, non-semantic and, as such, they preclude an exegetical response that is distinct from the hermeneutical procedures employed in the reception of non-representational visual art and music. In 'The Dollar Value of Poetry' Charles Bernstein advocates a poetics that is grounded in experiences that are released in the reading. In this sense, then, poetry is seen as being untranslatable and un-paraphrasable for 'what is untranslatable is the sum of all the specific conditions of the experience (place, time, order, light, mood, position, to infinity) made available by reading'. Bernstein sees this untranslatability as being misunderstood by advocates of 'certain "concretist" tendencies, who see in radical concrete procedures the manifestation of untranslatability at its fullest flowering'. As Bernstein, stresses 'what is not translatable is the

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experience released in the reading'. He goes on to say that 'in so far as some "visual poems" move toward making the understanding independent of the language it is written in, i.e., no longer requiring translation, they are, indeed, no longer so much writing as works of visual art. In 'Words and Pictures,' he emphasizes the linguistic and semantic criteria necessary for any aesthetic of viewer/reception theory to be plausible: 'visual experience is only validated when accompanied by a logico-verbal explanation'. For Bernstein, then, as he says in 'Thought's Measure,' 'there is meaning only in terms of language'.

Furthermore, he is well aware of the dangers of too much foregrounding of artifice when he writes in 'Artifice of Absorption':

In my poems, I

frequently use opaque & nonabsorbable

elements, digressions &

interruptions, as part of a technological

arsenal to create a more powerful

("souped up")

absorption than possible with traditional,

& blander, absorptive techniques. This is a

precarious road because insofar

as the poem seems

overtly self conscious, as opposed to internally

incantatory or psychically

actual, it may produce

self consciousness in the reader in such a way as to

destroy his or her absorption by theatricalizing

or conceptualizing the text, removing

it from the realm of an experience engendered

to that of a technique

exhibited.

Bernstein welcomes internalization. Without it, it is impossible for poetry to be experienced as an event in time. However, he does tend to view the semantic field as incorporating non-lexical features

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of a poem. While I agree with incorporation in principle, in practice it is psychologically problematical for most readers. This is perhaps why such poetry is deemed “difficult”.

It could be argued that visual poetry is, indeed, semantic. I agree to an extent. For instance, **Ernst Gomringer’s** ‘WIND’ (which plays with associations such as the words "in" and “win” contained within the word "WIND”) and **Augusto de Campos's** ‘CODIGO’ (which contains the word "God" as an anagram and alludes to "cogito ergo sum”) do, indeed, operate semantically. Nevertheless, their semantic operations are extremely meagre. With ‘WIND’ the associations come to only two words: “win” and “in” (perhaps also the word “wind”, as in to wind a clock). The same limitations can be seen in de Campos's ‘CODIGO’. Apart from a reader’s fleeting appreciation of the novel aspects of these poems their affects are exhausted no sooner than they are recognized.

In contrast, if we compare the following lines from ‘Into the Day’ by **J. H. Prynne** with ‘WIND’ and ‘CODIGO’ we can see their limitations more clearly:

Who does we reign our royal house

is roofed with fateful slates

These lines begin with the words ‘who does’ which immediately puts us into questioning mode, but the next word, ‘we’, draws our attention to the grammatical inappropriateness of the preceding word, ‘does’, in its location between ‘who’ and ‘we’. We have been led to expect a question but the grammatically incorrect syntax has frustrated this expectation. We are left instead with a language that rather than denoting a position of enquiry relies, instead, on connotation for this effect. This sort of “question” belongs to an "enquiry" that is syntactical rather than referential. In other words it is language pretending to be a question.

Similarly, ‘our royal house is roofed with fateful slates’ although syntactically correct contain the juxtaposition of ‘fateful’ with ‘slates’, two words not usually associated or combined with each other. This cannot be said of ‘roofed’ and ‘slate’ which often share the same juxtaposition. If the word ‘fateful’ had not been included there would be little room for plurality of meaning. The word ‘slates’ would mean solely roofing materials. It is the juxtaposition of ‘fateful’ and ‘slates’ that produces the plurality. A few of the dictionary definitions of the word ‘slate’ are: 1) a fine-grained rock that can be easily split into thin layers and is used as a roofing material. 2) a roofing tile of slate. 3) a writing tablet of slate. 4) a dark grey color. 5) a list of candidates in an election. ‘Slate’ is, thus, rich in connotation. The addition of ‘fateful’ enables any one of these meanings to become appropriate. For example, it is quite possible to have a fateful dark grey color—as in the sense of an omen. So, too, is it possible to have a fateful group of electoral candidates.

If we were to choose this latter image for one of the meanings of ‘fateful slates’ we could make it fit into the rest of the sentence (if it can rightly be called one) by opening up the meanings of ‘our royal house is roofed with’. This is fairly simple, as the idea of electoral candidates enables ‘royal house’ to connote a political arena of some sort as suggested by the word ‘house’ (The Houses of Parliament or The White House, for example). The word ‘roofed’ connotes a ‘covering-over’—a protection of some

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sort, as in the image of a bird's wing covering and protecting its young. If we take this as our connotation, then one of the many meanings of 'our royal house is roofed with fateful slates' could be: 'Our political system is protected from tyranny by its processes of electing political candidates who are under oath (fated) to guarantee this freedom from tyranny'. This interpretation of Prynne's 12 words is only possible with a richer semantic field of possibilities than both 'WIND' and 'CODIGO' provide.

The formal qualities of a poem are, of course, important but only indirectly: in that they facilitate the inner ear's appreciation of the poem's sonorous qualities. They do not contribute overmuch semantically. The only thing of importance is the mental activity experienced by the reader. The reader's attention should not be focused on the poem's structure or its rhetorical devices but, rather, should be concentrated on the resonance produced by the semantic qualities of the lexis. Only in this way, then, can the poem be fully experienced as mental activity. It must be remembered that a poem is primarily "heard" in the mind. All that we are able to glean from a poem is conveyed through the poem's semantic operations. To argue that the formal qualities of the text facilitate a more than limited semantic response is to rely too heavily on an aesthetic theory that is more appropriate to the visual arts.

Editor's Footnote: I was unable to format this piece so that Jeffrey's footnote numbers would appear in the piece. Their omission is my responsibility, not Jeffrey's.

L. M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p.12.

Rosenblatt, pp. 20-21.

Rosenblatt's attitude to the relevance of the text can be seen in the following quotation where she comments on the titles of literary works: 'But when we try to think of what a title—*Hamlet*, say, or *Moby Dick*—might refer to apart from a reader, whether the author himself or another, "the work" disappears. The title then refers simply to a set of black marks on ordered pages or to a set of sounds vibrating in the air, waiting for some reader or listener to interpret them as verbal symbols and, under their guidance, to make a work of art, the poem or novel or play'. See The Reader, the Text, the Poem, pp.12-13.

Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.10.

Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, p.58.

Bernstein, Content's Dream, p.58.

Bernstein, Content's Dream, p.58.

Bernstein, Content's Dream, p.125.

Bernstein, Content's Dream, p.62.

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Bernstein, A Poetics, pp.52-53.

email correspondence with Charles Bernstein dated June 26, 2005.

Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Steve Halle (Palatine, Illinois, USA), Adam Fieled (Logan Square, Philadelphia, USA) (2006)

SH: Useful concepts. I want to respond on Keats' Negative Capability, which I think introduced several useful concepts into modern poetics, and also served as a birthplace for the non-lyric/non-Romantic (I guess what you'd call "post-avant") lineage alive in contemporary poetics. First, I view Keats as the odd Romantic, along with Shelley. Whereas Shelley validated the entry of politics into poetry, Keats rebelled against the first wave of Romantics by heightening the power of the imagination and downplaying Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime."

The imaginative poetry Keats penned allowed for oddly juxtaposed words; in his Odes, *Nightingale* & *Grecian Urn*, for example; in order to create a reflection of his state of mind. Even though these two poems work in a highly stylized and rhetorical way, they reflect on Keats' consciousness— the power of imagination and the untranslatable power of the mind to hold disparate concepts without struggle. The idea of negative capability is also (ironically) an example of negative capability because neither Keats, nor anyone since, has presented, as far as I know, a good reason why some people embrace mystery and some people need closure.

"Indeterminacy" in poetry, it seems to me, is another big point of contention among experimentalists today, and I would assert that Keats' negative capability is the concept which paved the way for indeterminate poetics. I believe a relationship exists between the misinterpretation of "first thought, best thought" and the misuse of negative capability. People like to assume that Ginsberg, Kerouac and the Beats meant "first word, best word" or "first draft, best draft" and use their teachings, which are highly formulated methods for improvisational poetry, to justify writing whatever comes to mind. As we see with Bukowski, a poet who edited little (if at all), this work sometimes succeeds, often falls flat. The same is true for indeterminate poets whose work lacks closure. I think some poets misuse negative capability or "rejection of closure" as a means to avoid striving or thinking about their work. Poets who misuse negative capability think they can avoid essence, substance and arrival, but I think this is a big mistake because it fools poets into thinking they don't need intention or investigation and can operate solely on intuition.

Keats is also perhaps the first poet to address the idea that language is unsatisfactory for expressing ideas completely (though Shelley suggested this too). As skilled as any poet may be as word-smith, the poem will still be lacking to the thing-in-itself: be it the real triggering element of the poem or some abstract or intense thought or sensation the poet tries to grasp. Through negative capability and his understanding of the powers of and limitations of art, Keats may have been the earliest antecedent to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of this century. Language poets, of course, understood

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the fallibility of linguistic expression, so they began to work with language the way a painter might work with paints, allowing for pure linguistic abstraction and/or frustration, depending on whose side you're on. Critics sometimes call Keats a "mood" poet, meaning that every single word did not have to make total logical sense in the poem. Instead, Keats' linguistic consistency depended upon creating the desired mood, a different way of hitting "the just note": *le mot juste*.

Previous to Lang-po, I look at Keats as having laid the groundwork for the High Modernists, especially Wallace Stevens, who tried and perhaps failed as much as Keats did to create “poetry of imagination” or “supreme fiction.” Like Keats, Stevens valued the imagination of the maker over the rational mind, even though I feel that Stevens, again like Keats, often wrote rational and calculated poems. Keats' influence and the influence of negative capability cannot be overstated in an existence wherein making rational sense of everyday life, let alone the “big questions,” is nearly impossible.

AF: I take most of your points. The one problem I have with the schema that would put Keats behind Language Poetry and post-avant is that one could make a valid argument that Keats, bent as he was on Romantic (maybe post-Romantic) ideas of personal feeling and personal expression, pursued aims antithetical to these movements. It helps to remember that Keats mentioned negative capability in a letter, and he was referring to Shakespeare and Shakespeare’s dramatic technique, rather than his own poetry, which is rooted very much in Romantic explorations of self and self-hood (whether this is done obliquely, as in *Grecian Urn*, or directly, as in *Nightingale* and his great sonnets.) In theory, Negative Capability (and its implicit ancillary devices, non-linearity, allusiveness, abstruse tangent writing, deferral of personal expression, etc.) fits in snugly to the post-modern ethos that dictates what many of us do. But negative capability doesn’t factor as much into Keats’ own poetry as most people tend to assume. Even when he steps beyond the personal, it is often to challenge a historical figure— *Hyperion* is a direct response to Milton—or to tell a richly detailed but essentially linear story, as in *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*. So, I like the connection of Keats to Stevens and post-avant, and I’m willing to give it some cred, but for me, Lord Byron takes the “proto-post-modern” cake. Remember that extreme self-obsession (like extreme impersonality, or anything extreme, in fact) is also a common post-modern trope—think of the self-mythologizing of Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Tracy Emin, Robert Mapplethorpe, not to mention poets like Bukowski and Ginsberg, and before them Williams and Pound. Byron’s complete and often facetious self-absorption (pushed knowingly to the point of self-parody) paved the way for the “art of celebrity culture” or “art-in-kitsch” which dictates so much of what we’ve seen in the past fifty years (in the multi-media continuum of the aesthetic.)

SH: About the Net: the pros of the Internet poetry boom far outweigh the cons, i.m.h.o. It suits modern (United States) societal impulses to be able to get what you want, when you want it. In your case and mine, we publish virtually what we want, when we want to. In that sense, it's gratifying. We don't have to sift through mountainous submissions piles. As far as publishing our own work, ‘zines and blogs can offer instant gratification to us like no print outlet can.

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The “con” of instant gratification would seem to be instant disposability. A plethora of information means we face a choosier readership. When you purchase a print journal or collection, the tendency is to read it: it was a “monied” choice. As for my blog, people have to want to read what's there. If they aren't interested, they’re a mouse click away from something different. You and I have both discussed new poetry and the prospect of the old theme of immortality through verse. I think it's pointless to think about, because we can easily lose focus on what's important: the real work we do. The value of the lifestyle we lead (internet or not) is in doing the work, the process. I think your outlook on this might differ from mine, but I respect even the untrained poet because, essentially, he/she is getting the same benefits from doing the work as I am, regardless of poetic knowledge, lineage, theory or literary history. That's not to say I find untrained poets' work interesting. More than likely, the opposite is true, but I think I can quickly discern whether or not anyone will challenge my intellect, which is a big draw for me.

In addition to the instant gratification/instant disposability dichotomy the Internet establishes, the possibility of e-books excites me. I like materials and mobility. The combination of those two things is exciting. For the poems I write now, especially “investigative” poems, I like to have synthetic linguistic fragments or ideas handy. The Internet, and its ever-growing portability, enhances these desires for me. It's the old “writerly” advice I've heard from a number of sources: always have a book, a pen and paper on hand. With notebook computers and wi-fi technology, I can have all three in one. And given the trend of technology to shrink, portability will only increase. William Allegrezza's *moria* e-books are quite exciting because I can access them from virtually anywhere. The authors he publishes sacrifice money for hit counts. I think I'm resigned to the idea I'll never get rich off the po-biz game, so I'd rather publish an e-book that gets 3000 hits a month than make $3000 from a print book no one reads. The attention span and eye-training it takes to read an e-book will develop, as well.

The fact of the matter is, the Internet is the hub of the counterculture. This is where you MUST be if you write differently, think differently or live differently; our circle of avant-minded poets populates the Internet. The only way around its importance is with “eminence,” which few younger poets can claim. The Internet is the only way around the taste-making large-scale corporations like Borders and Barnes and Noble. They don't carry much counterculture material *per se*; they're looking for commodities.

AF: All good points and taken. One thing I would add about the Net is its international aspect. How else could we be in daily contact with poets in Mexico, Canada, England and Australia? This, I think, is the key to the success of *Jacket* and *Otoliths*. All artists have a need for commonality, to be part of a community larger than the small milieus that they generally, inevitably inhabit. *Jacket* has been instrumental in turning post-avant from a plethora of small, insular groups into a unified, international whole. This also applies to *Otoliths*. Between them, we have two publications that everyone, or almost everyone, in the post-avant community reads. The consolidation/unification of post-avant is almost entirely due to the influence of the Net. Centrist poetry can lay claim to no such unity. Do English, Australian, and Canadian Centrist poets read American Centrist journals, and vice

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versa? I would wager that they don't. *Ploughshares* in London? What I think post-avant really needs (and *Otoliths* is part of the way there) is a print equivalent of *Jacket*. If we could get in print what's already in motion on the Web, we'd really be poised for world domination.

SH: Where does post-avant poetry need to go and why does it need to go there?

This is a difficult question. I'm going to approach it from two angles, and then go on my own tangent. First, Ray Bianchi has said in conversation that post-avant poetry (I think he called it "experimental") needs an audience aside from poets. He compared post-avant poetics to contemporary visual art and avant-garde jazz, both of which he feels have an audience, albeit small ones, outside of the artists themselves. Regarding avant-garde jazz or improvised music or whatever they're calling it right now, I agree with Ray. Many of the local improvised music concert series in Chicago draw good-sized crowds. Sure, many of the non-musicians who go to these shows are artists, and experimental artists, in other fields, but it is an audience separate from the makers themselves; this is of utmost importance. People often compare modern poetics to a self-perpetuating system or "closed circle." Post-avant seems to be an elaborately staged version of that. Even though mainstream poetry is not commercially hot, I believe occasional readers of poetry tend to buy what Barnes & Noble carries on its brick and mortar store shelves. It's a scary thought if you're an experimental or "post-avant" writer. B&N tends to carry only the APR/Poetry crowd and their predecessors.

Additionally, there's a big current push to encourage poets to make "more accessible poems." You and I have talked about creating a middle path between extremely experimental and Centrist work, but I'm not sure we've settled on an answer. Poetry, in its loftiest manifestations, must work to move human linguistic and artistic expression forward. Partisans seems almost to suggest reversion to more basic creations, to expand the public's interest in verse culture. I think it's a dangerous idea. We first must answer this question: what do we (as poets) and everyone else (potential readers) want from poetry? I myself want poetry to live up to other art forms. What I mean is, poetry seems to be years behind other art modes (visual art, avant jazz specifically), with notable forward-thinking exceptions like Gertrude Stein and her aesthetic progeny. "New Thing" jazz started happening in the mid 1960s; Abstract Expressionism in art in the 1950s. What is the poetic equivalent of these, and when did it come into fashion? Assuming Language poetry could start that answer off.

Post-avant poetry, also, might be the answer to that question in a general way (or at least some of its subsections.) I don't feel that post-avant needs to reach toward the mainstream. Eventually the mainstream and post-avant or experimental poetics will merge— that seems to be the trend. When will this happen? Not for a while. I've generally heard it said that any move to anthologize poets is way behind the current trends in poetics, sometimes 50 years behind. Pierre Joris' and Jerome Rothenberg's *Poems for the Millennium* is perhaps the closest thing to an "anthology of the now" we have in poetry, and I don't think it's up-to-the-minute. Anthologies bring experimental verse to the classroom and seal its canonization. That's the path to mainstream readership and exposure to non-poet readers. Perhaps moves toward online anthologizing and the instantaneous possibility of the Internet will help post-avant poetry.

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Speculation aside, I don't know if I'm as distressed about post-avant's lack of non-poet readership. I see a great amount of high-quality work emerging from the post-avant community, especially through editing *Seven Corners*. I like the directions post-avant is headed in: investigative poetics, destabilization of the egotistical sublime, improvisational poetics, contingent poetics, synthetic language, multilingual poetry, expanded translation, re-co-opting language through political-poetic experimentation, etc.—important and interesting stuff, for my money. I'm sure you notice the same thing in *P.F.S. Post*— the poets are there, the work is good, what else can we ask for? The commitment should always be to doing the work, the "real work" as Gary Snyder would say. If the work is good, the readership will follow. For me, being a poet, post-avant or otherwise, is about the process of it all, the practice, the involvement with the art and the critical discussion that it creates.

AF: I think “process orientation” is indeed important, much more than the petty rat-race that poets (myself included) often get sucked into. My own particular preference would be towards a new kind of formalism. When you say formalism, people think you mean rhyming poems, odes and Shakespearean sonnets. I don’t mean that at all. For me, formalism means, quite simply, the willingness and devoted impetus to create new forms, whether they involve conventional melopoeia or not. For me, Picasso was the ultimate formalist, though he’s been tagged “Cubist” and lots of other things. Formalism ties in to seriality, working in series; you create a new form, then bend it and twist it every which way; exploring, seeing what works, milking it. Picasso spent decades proceeding in this fashion; as did Matisse, Monet, Braque, lots of the best visual artists. I suppose you could call Robert Creeley a serial poet—he came up with a signature style, and then most of his poems became (for the most part) variations on a theme. O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* are another good example of serial poetry composition. Yet, no one talks about Creeley or O’Hara as formalists, because, again, formalism is associated with archaisms, tepid retreads of old forms. New forms means a new language, however (as you said) oddly juxtaposed.

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